
A POLICY BRIEF

FEBRUARY 2021.
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT
The COVID 19 Pandemic and the public health emergency that it has occasioned globally and nationally has been the largest and most severe of such by an infectious disease, or by any other humanitarian emergency in living memory. And given the interconnected character of the global economy and human civilization in the 21st century, the socio-economic and political impact and consequences of the pandemic have also been unprecedented in the annals of human history.

As of Sunday, 7th of February 2021, according to the Nigeria Center for Disease Control [NCDC], the total number of confirmed cases across the country had risen to 139,748 persons, from a pool of 1,398, 630 total tested samples. These tested samples however include first time samples as well as samples tested subsequently to confirm transition from positive to negative result after treatment. At this rate, even without discounting for the number of multiple sample tests for confirmed and treated cases, the positivity rate stills stand at more than 10%. The implication of this is that projected across Nigeria’s estimated population of more than 200 million, more than 20 million Nigerians have contracted the virus and the disease.

Furthermore, of the 142,578 confirmed cases as of 10th February 2021, 116,947 have been treated, recovered and discharged [82.09% recovery rate], while 1,702 fatalities have been recorded [1.19 fatality rate], with the number of active cases being 23,929 nationwide.

A level of consistency can be observed with respect to the geopolitical zone burden of total number of confirmed cases, active cases and discharged cases at roughly 4%, the fatality rate for the zone is however more than double this trend at nearly 9%.

IMPACT ON EDUCATION AND THE GIRL CHILD: A GENERAL OVERVIEW
From March 2020, when the pandemic was formally acknowledged and declared in Nigeria, schools among other places were shut and closed with pupils sent home as part of the public health response to contain the spread of the pandemic and mitigate its impact.

In general, the impact of school closure as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic can be measured from various dimensions, and can be broadly categorised as follows:\footnote{Impact of COVID-19 on Nigerian Educational System: Strengths and Challenges of online/virtual education: By Alaba Tolulope}: Impact on Children; Impact on Families; Impact on Teachers and caregivers; Impact on University and other tertiary level education students; Impact on Young Graduates; as well as Impact on the Society/Community in general.

The resultant effect of the closure of schools was such that for the overwhelming majority of educational institutions and pupils and students, all academic activities became suspended, with the academic year suspended, and learning disrupted.

Students were not able to receive tuition, nor were teachers able to teach in all but a few insignificant numbers of instances [private schools]. Furthermore, in many cases, teachers were either not being paid, or were being paid fractions of their salaries.

Parents were also being overwhelmed with the burden of keeping children at home in the midst of a raging pandemic, and increasing economic hardships, while also becoming increasingly worried and concerned about the educational fate of their children and wards, especially those in final and graduating classes who were supposed to take final and graduating exams.

In the midst of all of these worries and concerns by parents, and proprietors of private schools, who were also worried about their businesses, there were increasing calls for schools to reopen, at least to enable students in graduating classes of primary six, JSS3, and SSS3 to resume in order for them to be able to sit for their respective final exams. The government eventually succumbed to
these pressures with students in exit classes being recalled to sit for their exit exams.
The pandemic and its impact on education further highlighted the inequalities in society, and exac-
terminated the gap between the rich and the poor in society.
As the debate around safe reopening of schools began to rage at the peak of the first wave of the
pandemic, and into the second wave at the end of 2020 and into January of 2021, it became clear
that public schools were predominantly not prepared for safe school reopening given their inability
to meet the requirements and protocols for safe reopening of schools.
A few private schools were however, on the contrary able to meet these requirements, and thus
able to reopen, and welcome pupils back to school.
In many cases, these were also the private schools which were able to switch to remote learning
using digital platforms during the period when schools were shut down, thus further accentuating
the access divide between the children of the poor and of the rich.
Apart from the above, there were also issues around mental health for all pupils and their parents
and teachers, not just for the pupils who were no longer able to receive tuition, but also for those
who were able to receive remote learning, even if it was to varying degree.
Even those pupils who were able to access and take advantage of remote learning through various
platforms, still suffered from the absence of in person learning with their peers.
And for the girl child the problems were compounded by the strain and stress of confinement, and
the attendant increased tendency towards sexual harassment and sexual abuse at home.
The school environment is potentially a space that can more easily be converted into a safe space
for the girl child to protect against abuse and violence, given the high potential to put in place safe
guards on a social basis and on scale, in comparison to the home, which are often overcrowded,
inadequately supervised, and susceptible to cultural tolerance of abuse.
Thus, there were wide disparities and inequalities in the impact of the
pandemic between children in rural and urban settings and schools, be-
tween children in public and private schools, and between children from
rich and poorer homes and households.
In the report of a national perception survey on school closures in Nige-
ria due to COVID-19 conducted by the Federal Ministry of Education and released in October
2020 for instance, key findings included that:
“There is broad agreement over the impact of the closures on students. 90% agree that the clo-
sure will cause setbacks to students, especially those children with special needs. 83% of respond-
ants agree that students could find it difficult to resume academic activities.”
Furthermore, the survey also found that “An overwhelming majority of respondents (90%) believe
that learning from home is inefficient and inadequate. Apart from some of the unsystematic
methods of learning from home, issues of exclusion, concentration, focus and interactiveness may have
formed some of the reasons why respondents believe that it is inadequate to learn from home.
Despite rising coronavirus figures, a majority of the respondents (80%) think that reopening
schools and learning centres is important to help learners recover lost learning time. Additionally,
70% of the respondents agree that blended learning that allows access to alternative learning
platforms will help learners recover lost learning time. Parents/guardians, teachers and education
managers of public institutions (91%) were as likely as those of private institutions (90%) to agree
with the premise that remote learning is adding little value to learning outcomes. Less than a tenth
of both private and public sector stakeholders were unsure.

“The pandemic and its impact on education further highlighted the inequalities in society, and
exacerbated the gap between the rich and the poor in society.”

"Report on National Survey on School Closure: Due to COVID-19; Federal Ministry of Education. October 2020"
preparedness of public education system to meet and overcome deep systemic disruptions and the weakness of its component institutions and mechanisms to meet those challenges. This is also in a very significant way a reflection of the grave inadequacy in both the quantity and quality of public investment in public education.

**STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF ONLINE/VIRTUAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**: A key response of the government to the impact of the pandemic was the closure of schools nationwide. This decision close schools and temporarily halt in-class learning then informed and forced the need to shift to alternate forms of learning and receiving education instruction including through broadcast media of radio and Television, as well as online through virtual platforms.

This shift to alternate forms of distance learning was most indicative of the inherent contradictions in Nigeria’s education system. It revealed not only the gross disparity and inequality with respect to availability of and access to basic infrastructure and education amenities and facilities necessary and requisite for modern schooling and education in the twenty first century; it also exposed grave inadequacy and near total lack of preparedness of public education system for impacting knowledge, and training the young in the modern age.

And whereas, the immense potential of alternate forms of distance learning were glaring to see, the endemic nature of poverty across the country, the near total absence of the requisite facilities to make the transition work effectively, occasioned by years of gross neglect and inadequate funding of public education combined to considerably reduced the potential impact of the migration to such platforms on enabling continuing education during the closure and pandemic, while also massively skewing access in favour of the rich and the elites. And although immense potential of an educational system incorporating online and virtual learning methods and platforms is apparent, the challenges posed by the current context of capacity and infrastructure for online education is overwhelming.

These include: Lack of technical know-how on the part of students and teachers; the excessively high cost and time consuming nature of accessing online education; poor and epileptic nature of power supply; High poverty levels among Nigerians; how to meet and ensure the needs of slow learners and children with special needs; the flexible nature of online education and the tendency towards inattentiveness and lack of focus and discipline it engenders; Difficulty in ensuring effective assessment of students; Disparity the schemes of work from school to school; Network and internet connectivity problems; and lack of conducive environment for learning at home for most children; among others.

**KEY FINDINGS OF A BASELINE SURVEY ON GENDER RESPONSIVENESS IN COVID-19 EDUCATION PLANS IN SOKOTO AND ADAMAWA STATES**: The FAWE-lead consortium consisting of Forum for African Women Educationalists, Plan International Nigeria and Civil Society Action Coalition on Education for All (CSACEFA), is a movement that recognize the importance of gender equality in achieving the right to education for all.

As part of its response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and the girl child, the consortium had undertaken a rapid baseline survey in Sokoto and Adamawa states. The assessment was conceived to find answers to one overarching research question— “What is the level of resilience and capacities of Local Education Authorities, adolescent girls and youths to protect themselves from the impact of COVID -19 in Sokoto and Adamawa States”?

1. Ibid
The findings of this survey, summarised below, are very instructive, and developing appropriate measures to address them will go a long way in enhancing the enhancing gender responsiveness in COVID-19 Education response plans across the North east and North west.

1. Whereas all categories of surveyed adolescents were knowledgeable about COVID-19 and ways of preventing the virus, with schools, religious organisations, radio, and the family ranking as the most frequent medium for learning about the virus; nevertheless, there were significant barriers to accessing lifesaving information by children living with disability. Furthermore, boys and girls were also found to respond differently to information about COVID-19, hence the need for gender disaggregated messaging on the pandemic.

2. 75% of children could not access education because schools were closed, and the 25% which had access rated the quality of the education received as poor. The major reason for this was poor electricity supply, but also lack of motivation. The overwhelming majority of surveyed children expressed a preference for classroom learning.

3. The impact on girl child education was disproportionately severe, and included increased frequency of sexual abuse, early marriage, hawking and trading [child labour], and reduced enthusiasm for education on the part of girls and their parents. Most of the surveyed adolescent knew of a girl that got married or got pregnant during the closure.

4. Although COVID-19 preventive protocols including hand washing, hand sanitisers, use of face masks, and social distancing were in place in the schools, nevertheless schools were overcrowded, and running water was insufficient, with boys and girls often having to use the same toilet facilities.

5. Protection needs of learners were not adequately met, with most schools lacking perimeter fencing, having overcrowded classrooms, and with inadequate WASH facilities to go round. Furthermore, there was no mechanism in place for counseling and attending to psychosocial needs of learners.

OVERVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF SOME INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO COVID-19 IMPACT ON EDUCATION:

A. Nigeria Education Sector COVID-19 Response Strategy In The North East⁶:

This response strategy was developed by the Nigeria Education in Emergencies Working Group [NEIEWG], led by UNICEF and Save The Children, and based in Maiduguri and with responsibility for education sector coordination, as well as coordination with other relevant sectors.

The goal of Nigeria Education In Emergency working Group is ensuring a preparedness and response plan that addresses: 1) Reduce morbidity and mortality due to COVID-19 among school learners, teachers and schools stakeholder in North East Nigeria, (2) mitigate the school closure negative impact on children learning and teacher wellbeing and (3) ensure effective, inclusive and safe return to quality learning for learners, teachers and SBMCS.

The Response Objectives of the strategy include;

i. **Response Objective 1** – to prevent the spread and transmission of coronavirus among learners, teachers, parents and SBMCS, targeting 4.2 million children;

ii. **Response Objective 2** – To mitigate/minimize the impact of school closure due to CIVID-19 on learning and wellbeing of learners, teachers, parents and SBMC through alternative Solutions; targeting 61,000 teachers;

iii. **Response Objective 3** – To ensure effective, inclusive and safe return to quality learning for learners, teachers and SBMCS; with a target to mobilise $16.7m for this purpose.

A monitoring plan was included in the strategy, with the aim of quarterly review of progress towards implementation of the strategy.

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⁶ Nigeria Education Sector COVID-19 Response Strategy in the North East; By Nigeria Education in Emergency Working Group. 2020
It is not particularly clear how far the objectives of the response strategy have been met thus far, however a situation report by UNICEF at the end of August 2020, paints a gloomy picture overall with respect to the whole country.

For instance, of the 20,985,136 children targeted overall across the country for support to migrate to distance/homebased learning, only 12,293,003 were reached during the school closure occasioned by the first wave of COVID-19.

Similarly, of the 43,000 schools targeted for support to implement safe schools reopening protocols [COVID-19 prevention], only 4,086 were reached and supported to implement the protocols. And of the 2,550,000 children, parents and caregivers targeted to be provided with community based mental health and psychosocial support; only 105,034 were reached and provided with the support.

B. The Nigeria Governors Forum [NGF]\textsuperscript{7}:

The NGF is the forum that brings together all the governors and Chief Executives of the 36 states of the federation at the subnational level. And with education being on the concurrent legislative list in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria [CFRN] as amended, the responsibility for making and implementing policies for ensuring access to quality education by Nigerians is shared between the Federal and state governments of Nigeria.

In response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and its impact, the NGF had undertaken measures to:

i. Develop and implement a communications and collaboration plan for all state governors to build synergy and ensure coordination in their response;

ii. Recently Agreed a resolution to work towards the joint development and coordinated implementation of a National Response Strategy and Plan to COVID-19 beyond the existing Federal Government Plan, that focus on Prevention; Treatment, and Economic response;

iii. Adopted a gender specific response strategy involving declaration of a state of emergency that will lead to: Strengthening of the gender-based violence prohibition laws; Strengthening of the Child Rights Act; and establishment of Sexual Assault referral centers.

Laudable as these measures are, the significant gap is in the absence of any elaborative framework including specific policy instruments, addressing institutional and investment requirements, with specific targets to realise these stated goals.

Despite the good intentioned existence of the NGF however, the reality is that there is seldom cooperation and collaboration between state governments in Nigeria, or between state governments and the federal government with respect to their response to the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, or to major developmental issues in general, regardless of assertions to the contrary or the development of joint frameworks.

**RECOMMENDATIONS/WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE:** Overarching Recommendations;

In order for all of these issues to be adequately addressed in ensuring the safe reopening of schools, the following steps are fundamental;

I. A multi-stakeholder approach and process [both vertically and horizontally] is required, that will include representatives of all the stakeholders in education and health – including parents, school managements, school proprietors, teachers, nonteaching staff, communities, and students. This is to be built on the back of an all-inclusive Whole Of government [including representatives of relevant institutions across the arms and levels of government]; and All of Society [including non-state actors, communities etc] approach.

II. This multi-stakeholder Safe School Reopening framework implementation committee will have the task and responsibility of discussing and determining the procedure for implementation and enforcement of all the necessary safeguards, and the length of time required to make the
necessary preparations and put the measures in place; including allocation of resources and disbursement of funds, as well as monitoring compliance and agreeing and recommending sanctions.

III. All of the procedures to safeguard public health in schools will require adequate and appropriate financing and funding. Government will have to substantially increase funding for education and health beyond current levels to ensure that the measures are put in place and enforced.

IV. Government – Federal and State governments, and the CBN will need to establish Special COVID 19 Pandemic Response Education and Health [Intervention] Funds. For instance, the 2020 Federal budget included the appropriation of a N500bn COVID 19 intervention fund. The FGN had indicated that N186bn of this was earmarked for the health sector. Substantial amounts should be earmarked in special intervention funds for the education and health sectors by both Federal and State Governments to ensure the full implementation of all the measures outlined in both the guidelines for safe schools reopening and the public health guidance for safe reopening of schools across the country.

V. The Nigeria Governors Forum [NGF] should work with the Federal Government to develop and implement a National Safe Schools Reopening Plan. Towards this end, the NGF should establish a Joint Coordination Mechanism for Safe Reopening of schools across the country.

VI. The Federal and State Ministries of Education, Health, Youth Development and Women Affairs should constitute an inter-agency task force on Gender Equity and Social Inclusion to ensure and enhance Gender Responsiveness in COVID-19 and Post COVID-19 Educational strategies and plans.

Specific Recommendations Gender Equity and Social Inclusion⁸:

a. The North East and North West Governors Forums should establish Inter – Ministerial Task Force on gender responsive education plans comprising the Ministries of Education, Youth Development, Health, and Women Affairs, to be Co-Chaired by the Ministries/Commissioners for Education and Women Affairs. This inter-ministerial task force will coordinate the inter-agency collaborations towards enhancing gender responsiveness in the COVID-19 Educational [Response] Plans.

b. Gender Equity and Social Inclusive Framework should be developed by the inter-ministerial task force, and should be utilised as the basis for the conduct of the various assessments to be undertaken with respect to safe reopening of schools, and its findings should be the basis for developing the gender responsive COVID-19 educational plans.

c. Create, design and disseminate specific and targeted information and messaging on the COVID-19 pandemic for children with disability and special needs.

d. Sensitisation of Parents and religious leaders on COVID-19 prevention and mitigation measures is necessary given the influence they have on children and their upbringing. This will establish additional pathways to creating awareness on COVID-19 among children.

e. Boys and girls respond differently to information about COVID 19 hence the need to ensure gender disaggregation of COVID 19 messaging along with the use relatable themes to ensure adherence.

f. Deliberate measures and mechanisms are required to be put in place to ensure that communities are actively involved in and engaged with the establishment and management of schools, as well as with the provisioning of the education of their children. This will help to build ownership and community resilience.

g. Deliberate measures and mechanisms, including the use of incentives and sanctions, are need-

⁸Public Health Guidance For Safe Reopening Of Schools in Nigeria. By NCDC.
ed to be put in place and implemented to ensure return of the girl child to school, as well as to improve and enhance enrollment and retention of the girl child in school.
h. Schools will need to be provided with counsellors and their capacity will need to be built to provide career advice and psychosocial support to pupils in school.
i. Provision of constant water in the WASH facilities is paramount, including in toilets. This will enable girls to feel free to use the facilities.
j. Keeping the toilets neat, promoting frequent hand washing, and healthy personal hygiene as an integral part of the learning culture is very important.
k. Increased funding and capacity building to boast the gender-responsive data and information management mechanisms in the education sector in the states is required.
l. Capacity of guidance counselors will have to be built to enable them support vulnerable girls that have experienced violence.
m. Safe spaces for girls should be established in schools, along with establishment of cluster sexual assault referral centers for a hub of schools.
n. Periodic capacity training for teachers on gender responsive pedagogy is necessary.
Specific Recommendations To Facilitate Integration of Online and Digital platforms into the Education System:
1. Government should see the need to build good schools and equip them with modern digital facilities that can aid online education by providing digital devices as well as internet connections.
2. Government should ensure inclusion of online teaching such as integrated digital learning platforms, videos lessons; broadcasting through radio and TV etc. to supplement the normal classroom teaching even when there is no pandemics or disaster.
3. Government and educational stakeholders must ensure uniformity in curriculum and scheme of work used by teachers from schools to schools at every facet of education. It should be the duty of educational inspectors to ensure that teachers and schools adhere strictly to the planned curriculum and scheme of work as online teaching program should also be incorporated into school timetables.
4. Educators as well as students must be trained on how to handle and use online educational devices. Educators must spend quality time to prepare and make their lessons creative, interactive, relevant, student-centered and group-based.
5. Parents should pay personal attention to monitor and supervise their children until they adapt to online teaching environment.
6. Government aid is needed in terms of investing in educational tools of the future alongside a total revamp of the educational sector as reforms in the national curriculum post-pandemic would be an effective way to bridge the gap in inequality.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS: