

COMMENTARY

Rural Children Suffer Most in COVID-19 Related School Closures



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On March 15, 2020, after the first case of coronavirus was confirmed in Kenya two days earlier, the government announced the immediate closure of all schools by March 20, 2020, as part of containment measures. The closure of over 90,000 schools disrupted learning for approximately 18 million children in pre-primary, primary and secondary schools, and jobs for 300,000 teachers were in jeopardy. Among the affected learners are 150,000 refugees, marginalized and vulnerable children, special needs learners, and some 1.2 million class eight and 750,000 form four candidates who were expected to sit for national exams at the end of the year. In July, the Ministry of Education announced that the school year will have to be repeated, causing angst in children, especially candidates, and parents nationwide.

In response to the pandemic, the Ministry of Education developed a COVID-19 response plan which aims to, *inter alia*, provide equitable access to continued learning, facilitate production and dissemination of *online* learning and teaching materials, support teachers in conducting virtual learning, and develop interventions for marginalized and vulnerable children.

Since the closure of schools, the Ministry of Education proposed distance learning solutions delivered through radio, TV, education apps, and mobile phones as viable options to continued learning. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) was tasked with providing and approving digital content. Some of the broadcast media platforms include EDU-TV and Elimu TV. Computer and smartphone learning platforms include Viusasa, YouTube, Kenya Education Cloud, WhatsApp, among others.

Four months in and major challenges have emerged. A survey by non-profit group Usawa Agenda [1] in May this year revealed that about one in five children were accessing *online* learning, with children in private school twice as likely to access digital learning as compared to those in public school. Similarly, about one in five parents were aware that their children should continue learning from home, and one in ten children from public schools accessed digital learning. Unequal access to TV, radio, smartphones, computers, and supporting infrastructure (electricity, internet) has made some of these interventions ineffective. Education analysts have accused the Ministry of Education of entrenching education inequalities with distance learning interventions. E-learning tools, including smartphones and computers, are beyond the reach of most rural households. In families where these devices are available, they are a preserve of the parents, and children can only use them for a limited time of the day. Besides, internet and electricity supply are expensive for households, many of which have to balance the food and health needs of the members. Able parents have had to purchase smartphones whose usage by the children needs to be monitored. These are challenging times for parents. For example, during extended school closure, parents and guardians are forced to homeschool and supervise their children's learning with little preparation. Parents with low literacy levels, those without TV, electricity, or digital devices, and those who work for daily wages without childcare are frustrated by the closure of schools. Without dedicated engagement in a school setting, children are bound to fall behind in the curriculum because *online* learning is intermittent, unsupervised, and lacks clear guidelines for its assessment.

When not in school, adolescent girls face the dangers of domestic/gender-based violence and are at risk of early pregnancies and marriages. To support the family's economic needs, some girls have sought employment as domestic workers and caregivers. Boys are likely to drop out of school in search of employment (farm labor, informal sector) to supplement the family's meagre income. A National Council for Population and Development (NCPD) March 2020 report [2] found that 20,828 girls aged between 10 and 14 years have become mothers while the 24,106 girls aged between 15-19 years are either pregnant or mothers already. Though the incidence is mostly similar in rural and urban counties, rural (and marginalized) counties continuously report higher numbers than the rest of the country. A new survey on the state of boys has revealed a very sad situation whereby boys suffer quietly as they are sexually abused oftentimes by family members and/or people known to them. Many are dragged into drugs and other criminal activities. And because boys are raised to be "tough", they do not talk much about it, much less report to law enforcement personnel.

The Kenya Health Information System data revealed that between January and May of 2020, Machakos County reported 4000 cases of teenage pregnancies; Nakuru County reported 1748 cases, Kajiado County 1523 cases, Kericho County 1006 cases, and Garissa County 901 cases. The impact on girls' education is unbelievable as only two percent of teenage mothers return to school, even though there is a government policy that allows them to return. During the pandemic, media reports have awakened the country and our leaders to a teenage pregnancy crisis and sexual violence cases in school-age girls and boys. Reports of defilement of minors by family members, assistant chiefs, police, teachers, neighbours dominate the news cycles in Kenya. This crisis has caused outrage and fear in Kenyan parents as schools are set to be closed for the rest of the year (6 months to go). Chiefs (local administrators) have been called upon to act on cases of defilement of minors in their jurisdictions; otherwise, they will be answerable to the highest office [3]. Though prosecutable offenses, cases go unreported or are not followed up after reporting because of obstacles in the criminal justice system in cases of alleged defilement [4]. Sometimes families will prefer to keep it quiet especially when the perpetrator is a family member or seek justice in a village-elder court.

When in session, school feeding programs guarantee at least one meal for children. Pre-primary children get porridge, partly sponsored by the Ministry of Education, and other learners participate in the lunch program at will or through public and private sponsorship. Hunger makes it difficult for children to stay at home or to engage in any learning. Worse, the abrupt school closure has placed many children in the path of food insecurity and malnutrition. Girls from poor households receive sanitary pads in school, enabling them to study uninterrupted. Now, staying at home with parents who find themselves with no source of livelihood and having to feed children who ordinarily would be at school, the last thing on their minds is sanitary pads.

Teachers' livelihoods have also been affected. Many private school teachers are out of work or on reduced pay. Some private school owners have had to close their schools permanently due to prolonged school closures. Teachers are respected members of their communities, pillars whom many turn to for solutions and help during difficult times. With diminished economic opportunities in rural areas, some parents are sending their

children to the teacher's home to eat when there is no food at home. This is putting a strain on teachers' finances. They need psychosocial and financial support. Madam Neaty Lisudza, headteacher at Eshibimbi primary school in western Kenya feeds 16 orphaned and very poor children in her home daily and keeps them engaged in different activities. She is concerned about the girls in her school who lack sanitary and psychosocial support.

As the country prepared for phased reopening, the Ministry of Education had envisioned schools resuming in September with preventive measures in place like social distancing, sanitization stations, and masks. This proposal was met with a lot of criticism from the public because social distancing would not be possible in rural public schools, where children are overcrowded in a few classrooms; many of which are falling apart. A few weeks later, the government reversed this decision citing the inability of schools to reopen as many of them had more than 100 children crowded in a classroom and the rising cases of coronavirus in the country.

These challenges put the government in a *catch-22* situation because extended school closures will cause children to fall behind in learning, and on the other hand, reopening will put children at risk of coronavirus at a time when counties are ill-prepared to handle many cases. Perhaps this time presents education stakeholders and decision-makers an opportunity to direct more funds like the CDF (Community Development Fund) to build more classrooms, and for the government to hire more teachers and properly fund basic education. Moreover, citizen awareness of their rights regarding education and demand for the fulfillment of these rights is urgent. We do not know how long this situation will last, or when the next global crisis will come, but it would be a shame if we found ourselves facing the same problems again in the future.

Our organization, Rural Outreach Africa (ROA), has been working in rural western Kenya schools to promote food security and nutrition, empowering girls and boys to pursue education, mobilizing support for girls' sanitary pads, directing challenges faced by rural schools to the relevant stakeholders, and researching factors that promote student retention and graduation rates. We work closely with the County Directors of Education, Ministry of Education, KICD, stakeholders in research, and the private sector.

Through agricultural (4K) clubs, we teach children and teachers how to grow affordable nutritious foods like indigenous vegetables, beans, soybeans, orange-fleshed sweet potato, bananas, maize, tomatoes, spinach, kale, and other local foods. We also provide technical expertise in animal husbandry projects like goats, sheep chicken, rabbits, and dairy through our field extension staff. To empower the children, we provide them with vegetable seed packets to start kitchen gardens in their homes. Teachers and parents are encouraged to support the children in their enterprises and also take up the practice. Children (and families) learn that they can supplement food purchased from the markets with their produce, and also earn some money from sales of vegetables. Further, children who are busy with their small agricultural enterprises at home can resist engaging in anti-social behavior like drug abuse and criminal gangs. This work has been funded by individuals, private companies, development partners, and universities.

Ensuring household food security in times like these is of great importance as the country's food sector is facing major challenges starting with a locust invasion at the beginning of the year, persistent flooding, and now COVID-19.

We asked teachers to share their experiences on COVID-19; how it has affected learning, children, and teachers. We shall continue to solicit feedback and intervention ideas from teachers to support them at this time. These are some responses we received.

- “Children are idle, spending their days roaming around the neighborhoods. There is a risk of them contracting coronavirus because they interact with many people without masks or frequent hand washing /sanitizing.”
- “COVID-19 is creating enmity between teachers (or those who are observing health directives) and some members of the community (who do not observe these directives). They do not believe that coronavirus is real. Even with containment measures in place (curfew, restricted travel, meetings, etc.) most worrying is disregard for these guidelines.”
- “Learning for this year will go back to square one because children rely only on what they get in school. Little formal learning takes place at home.”
- “Covid19 has confirmed that schools are a second home to the learners. In their teachers, children have caring parents who share love, passion, and life skills. Teachers play together with the children and have positive attitudes towards the children, and sometimes even when they have not had enough food, they still can afford a smile. Teachers mentor, praise, love, and share all that they have, i.e., time and psychological needs.”
- “Most parents have no time for their children. Therefore, children are looking for “love” elsewhere. Most parents also are not familiar with good parenting skills, especially those who work to meet daily needs. Parents are angry, and their children are hungry. Learning cannot take place when they are hungry.”
- “The pandemic has brought with it opportunities for everyone: children can bond with their parents, learning to do lots of stuff at home, teachers getting the ever-elusive rest and getting to know their neighbors, and also planning for retirement.”
- “I miss my school children to the extent that I keep wondering how I can continue linking up with our school-going children.”

From this feedback, we see that schools are not only academic centers but a place where children learn morals, where their skills and talents are nurtured, where they receive mentorship from their teachers to grow into productive members of society. Educators are going beyond the call of duty to prevent societal breakdown, to uphold morals, and meet the most basic need of food for their students. The COVID-19

pandemic has brought out many inequalities and injustices in our society. Faced with these challenges and prolonged time away from school, many children may not return to school when they reopen.



Mr. Bernard Imbayi, 4K patron at Lunza primary school went round 4K club members' homes to deliver tomatoes. Part of the harvest from the 4K club's greenhouse.



Meals prepared by Madam Neaty Lisudza, the headteacher at Eshibimbi primary school. She provides a meal for 10 orphaned and vulnerable children in her village. They also do COVID sensitization through art.



Please reach out to us at knjeri2003@gmail.com and oniango@iconnect.co.ke to help us with resources, technical and funding, for this cause. We appreciate everyone for their support. More information can be found on our website <https://ruraloutreachafrica.org/school-based-programs/>.

SOURCES

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