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THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CONTINUED LEARNING IN THE MIDDLE EAST, EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA (MEESA) REGION

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to establish the impact of covid-19 on continued learning in the Middle East, Eastern and Southern Africa (MEESA) region.

Materials and Methods: Using appreciative inquiry methods, the study conducted 2-7 in-country key informant interviews and 2 focus groups in select countries across diverse geographies and perspectives. Focus group discussions were assembled through the support of Plan International and its network of organizations providing education support to children, adolescent girls, and young women. The purposive sampling procedure was utilized on the evaluation to have a targeted reach of relevant stakeholders on the training based on Plan International's network in-country. Ultimately, a reasonable sample was drawn with the goal of reaching saturation for reliable inference. A total of 20 interviews were conducted, which includes 6 KII and 14 FGDs. The digital platforms used were Zoom and Microsoft Teams. These conversations were recorded and stored for use during analysis. The qualitative findings on this evaluation were coded with ideas and thoughts noted during the process of data collection using a thematic approach to qualitative analysis. After data collection from the 5 countries, the data was transcribed and arranged in order of the respective research questions that were asked and based on the interview topic guide.

Results: The findings indicate that following COVID-19 lockdowns and implementation of further restrictions, all the countries of focus experienced closure of schools at least once between March 2020 and March 2021. This resulted in disruption on learning particularly for adolescent girls and young women.

Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy: The study recommends that the governments should prioritize the education of all children, including the most marginalised, the emphasis was on encouraging governments to assess the response of institutions and enabling education to continue in some form outside its traditional setting. Enhance **multi-level and multisectoral response** for continued access to learning during a pandemic such as COVID-19 by strengthening education technical working groups working on continued access to learning.

Key words: *Covid-19, Continued Learning, Middle East, Eastern and Southern Africa (MEESA)*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The World Bank reported COVID-19 to have created the worst crisis for education and learning in a century.ⁱ As of 18th June 2021, over **3.8 million people** had lost their lives due to the virusⁱⁱ. To deal with the spread of the virus, most governments instituted strict lockdown measures. These measures led to an interruption in education, essential services, and a request for people to stay at home. As a result, the world now finds itself in a severe global recession, increasing poverty and inequality within and between countries. The effects on people's lives are profound, but when it comes to children and adolescents there is the fear of a lost generation.

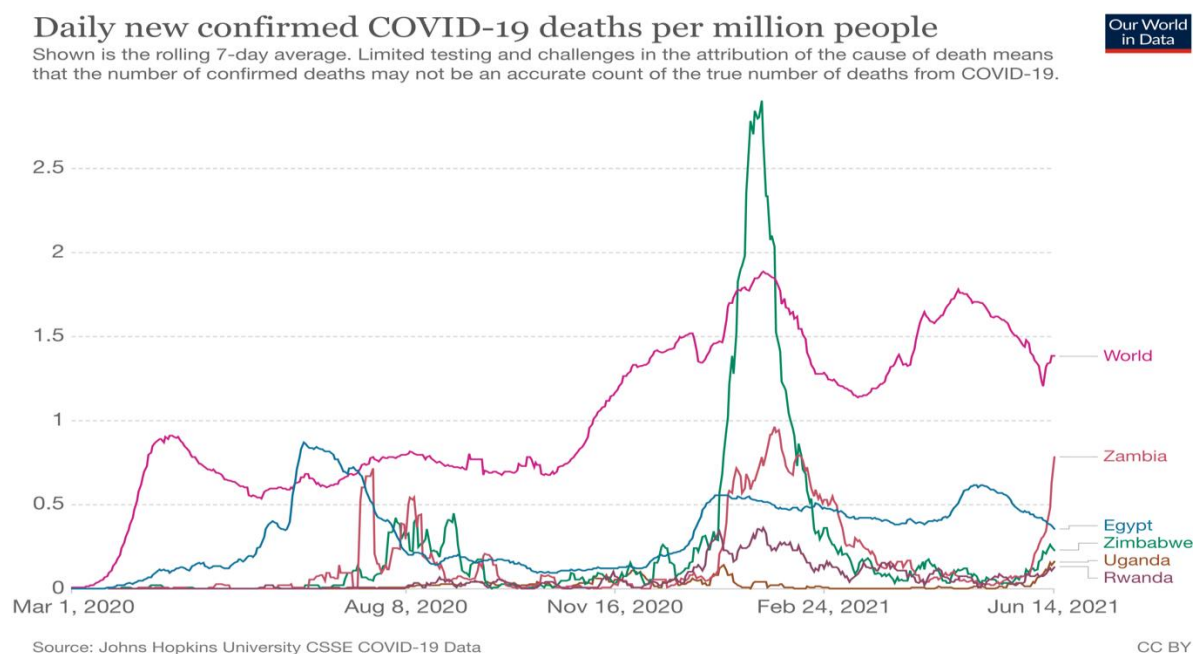


Figure 1: Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people in Zambia, Uganda, Egypt, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe (18th June 2021)

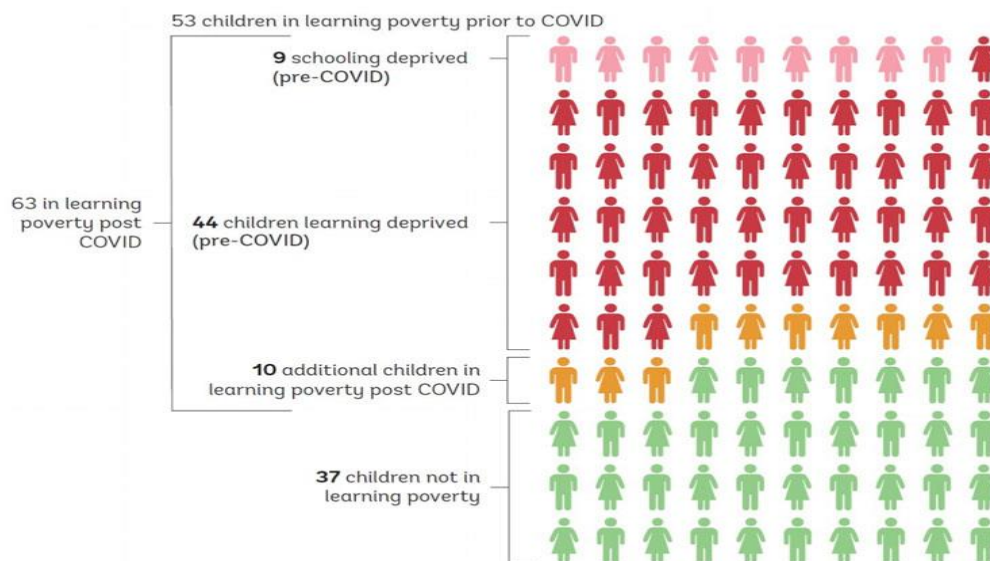
Before the worldwide lockdowns, the world was already facing a global learning crisis. The global learning poverty rate is estimated at 48 percent: almost half of the world's children cannot read and understand a simple text by age 10. In low-income countries, this is particularly acute, with the learning poverty rate reaching 90 percent in some cases. At least 175 million pre-primary school aged children and 258 million primary and secondary school aged children (one in five) were out of school before the pandemic, and this is only expected to worsen with current measures. It is estimated that at the peak of pandemic and school closures in April 2020 1.6 billion children were taken out of classrooms.ⁱⁱⁱ

Children, adolescents, and young adults are already struggling to access education, with this barrier being higher among others. Amongst these are girls, who progress in education threatens to reverse during the pandemic. Considering that girls have additional factors that make them susceptible to delayed access to education, the pandemic has worsened their ability to access learning.^{iv}

Learning is a basic human right – universal, inalienable, and indivisible. It is also a key driver of other fundamental rights and freedoms, and has wide-ranging human, social, health and economic benefits. It reduces poverty, drives sustainable growth, prevents inequality and injustice, leads to better health – particularly for women and children – promotes stability and peace, protects the planet, and helps build resilience for addressing crises.^v

Estimated impacts of COVID-19 on Learning Poverty

For every 100 children in low- and middle-income countries



Source: Azevedo (2020). Pessimistic Scenario (of 70% of school closure, very low mitigation effectiveness, no remediation, and WB-MPO June). For more details on the simulation methodology, see Azevedo et al (2020)

Addressing learning poverty is an urgent need which is also well reflected by Sustainable Development Goal 4 to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple other education challenges stand out today as acute and urgent: i) the inclusiveness of education systems, in particular for children with disabilities; ii) learning during emergencies and crisis times, starting with analysing risks and finding solutions for resilient education systems; iii) the institutional capacities to plan, deliver and monitor quality education; and iv) the alignment and related incentives of education systems and stakeholders towards learning.^{vi}

Important to note is that the impact of poverty on girls’ lives is multi-faceted. This is not a new situation and was bad enough before COVID-19, and it will get worse and likely last a long time. If the economic downturn is as severe as predicted, families may no longer be able to afford school, particularly for the girls, and may prefer them to explore income-earning activities.^{vii}

On 14 March 2020, the government of **Rwanda** announced the closure of all schools following the identification of the first COVID-19 case in Rwanda. Subsequently, on 1 May, the government announced that the school calendar year would shift, with the intention to change to a September to June school year. The Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) further announced on

October 13 that secondary and upper primary schools would start reopening in phases in November 2020. Along with the change in the school year, students would return to the grade they were in before school closures (so effectively would repeat part of the year). Following school closure, the Rwandan government implemented several initiatives to ensure student learning could continue. The Rwanda Education Board (REB) began broadcasting education programs on national TV and radio and launched a YouTube channel called REB eLearning with educational content for students. REB also strengthened its online learning portal to support remote learning for schools and teachers. In addition, the platform provides professional development for teachers and school leaders, with a focus on digital skills.^{viii}

In **Zimbabwe**, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the learning of over **4.6 million children**. When the COVID-19 virus began to spread in the country in March 2020, it forced the country into a nationwide lockdown, with unknown impact on children's learning. Since the start of the pandemic, Zimbabwe had followed a phased approach to school closing and reopening. Schools were fully closed for face-to-face learning from March to Mid-September 2020, partially reopened from Mid Sept-Oct and then fully reopened again from Nov-Dec 2020. From Jan 2021 to March 2021 schools were partially reopened but they are now fully open since beginning of April 2021. In the face of the pandemic and during the whole of 2020, the country has been developing alternative ways to ensure continuity of learning. In the first months of the pandemic, this meant broadcasting lessons on the radio. This proved effective but once the lessons were played, there was no digital library to allow students to access these radio lessons late.^{ix}

The COVID-19 pandemic poses serious threats to the access of education in **Uganda**, and innovative solutions are needed to support this sector and ensure the continued education of rural populations. Uganda's education system uses the following structure: 7 years of primary education, 6 years of secondary education, and 3-5 years of post-secondary education, and students can choose between private and public schools depending on their resources. However, there are significant gaps between school enrolment in rural and urban areas. Students are more likely to complete primary school in urban areas as opposed to rural areas, and around 91% of children attend primary school in urban areas, compared to 85% in rural areas. This gap is more noticeable in secondary education, as 38% of children of secondary school age in urban areas attend school, compared to only 14% of children in rural areas (EPDC, 3-6). Female literacy rates are much larger in urban areas as opposed to rural areas, and incomes are higher in urban areas as well. 80% of Uganda's school-age children live in rural areas that are characterized by a lack of resources for basic living and underdeveloped infrastructure for education. As the pandemic continues, education in poorer rural areas will be hit the hardest due to underlying disparities hereby outlined.^x

According to World Vision (2020), since March 18, 2020, when **Zambia** recorded the first case of COVID-19, education for more than **4.4 million** children and adolescents got disrupted, potentially regressing progress made in attaining Sustainable Development Goal number 4, including the attainment of high-quality primary and secondary education. Children's routine has also not been the same, resulting in unprecedented stress among many. The most vulnerable, including those living with disabilities and migrant children are most affected by the impacts of COVID-19 because they face additional vulnerabilities, as access to education is entirely in jeopardy during this period when gatherings and school access is

limited.^{xi} Also, people experiencing social disadvantage and marginalisation are known to be disproportionately impacted by ill-health. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, persons with disabilities may have increased risk for exposure, complications, and death as: Persons with disabilities are disproportionately represented among older populations, who are known to be at increased risk in the COVID-19 pandemic; Children and adults with disabilities may have underlying health conditions that increase their risk of serious complications from COVID-19; Persons with disabilities are disproportionately represented among the world's people living in poverty. It has been identified that the impacts of COVID-19 are likely to be worse for people in lower socio-economic groups.^{xii}

Ever since the COVID-19 virus hit **Egypt**, the Egyptian Government has undertaken several strict measures to prevent the rapid spread of the disease within the education sector. With approximately **20 million** students enrolled in schools and universities across the country, the Education sector has been one of the sectors that has been most affected by the pandemic. In March 2020, the Egyptian Government decided to shut down all schools and universities and have all teaching undertaken virtually. The Egyptian Ministry of Education launched an online portal where all the teaching material was uploaded and where the students submit their work to be reviewed by teachers. On the other hand, the Ministry of Higher Education ensured that all lectures were taught online and allowed each faculty to mandate the method of teaching.^{xiii}

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Though there is yet to be a measure of the full effect of the COVID-19 crisis on education, it is evident that millions of students are at risk of not returning to education institutions, with many of them eventually dropping out. This is due to several factors including: a) financial constraints and pressure to take up employment, b) household chores, c) childcare, especially when parents or caregivers are ill or have passed away, d) early and forced marriage and/or early and unintended pregnancy, with girls being particularly vulnerable, and e) fear of resurgence of the virus.^{xiv}

Loss of learning time and learning gaps incurred during the confinement may also further drive disadvantaged learners away from education. Moreover, where remote learning has not been effective, learners may become disinterested in education, even after schools reopen. UNESCO¹ projections, covering 180 countries and territories, estimate that about **24 million students** (from pre-primary to tertiary education) were at risk of not returning to education institutions in 2020, including care centres, schools, universities, or other training institutions, of which **10.9 million** are in primary and secondary levels. Out of this, **11.2 million are girls and young women**, with **5.2 million** of them being primary and secondary school students.^{xv}

The 10.9 million in primary and secondary levels is in addition to the **258 million** children and youth of this age who were already out of school prior to the crisis. These findings are likely to be adjusted as the sanitary situation continues to evolve. Tertiary education is affected the most, with an estimated 3.5% decline in enrolment, resulting in 7.9 million fewer students. This is

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

followed by pre-primary education with an estimated **2.8%** decline in enrolments, corresponding to 5 million children. Primary and secondary education are likely to be relatively less affected.^{xvi}

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Using appreciative inquiry methods, the study conducted 2-7 in-country key informant interviews and 2 focus groups in select countries across diverse geographies and perspectives. Focus group discussions were assembled through the support of Plan International and its network of organizations providing education support to children, adolescent girls, and young women. The purposive sampling procedure was utilised on the evaluation to have a targeted reach of relevant stakeholders on the training based on Plan International's network in-country. Ultimately, a reasonable sample was drawn with the goal of reaching saturation for reliable inference. A total of 20 interviews were conducted, which includes 6 KII and 14 FGDs. The digital platforms used were Zoom and Microsoft Teams. These conversations were recorded and stored for use during analysis. The qualitative findings on this evaluation were coded with ideas and thoughts noted during the process of data collection using a thematic approach to qualitative analysis. After data collection from the 5 countries, the data was transcribed and arranged in order of the respective research questions that were asked and based on the interview topic guide.

3.0 RESULTS

National Lockdown was one of the immediate results of COVID-19 on the countries of focus in the MEESA region due to increasing positivity rates, number of people hospitalised and COVID-19 related deaths. As a result of the lockdown, education and key essential services were disrupted.

At national level, all countries on the evaluation experienced COVID-19 related restrictions that included lockdowns; implemented on varying levels. Some countries from the onset of the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11th March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO) went ahead to institute total lockdown which also led to closure of schools.^{xvii} For example, in Rwanda as soon as the country started to experience the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak, the government instituted a total lockdown as early as March 2020, which resulted in closure of all learning institutions.

“Just like the rest of the countries in our region and even beyond, Zimbabwe also experienced the COVID-19 lock downs, this literally also resulted in closure of all schools. And there was a long period of school closure, which then meant that there was discontinuation in terms of learning.”—FGD, Zimbabwe

“When we started having the COVID 19 outbreak the government of Rwanda started having the total lockdown in March 2020, which saw the closure of all schools.”—FGD, Rwanda

As a result of the lockdown, countries faced **economic challenges** due to the slowed down functioning of essential economic activities with an impact at both micro and macro levels. At macro level it was reported that some key industries and sectors responsible for employment either slowed down or shutdown hence having a ripple effect on micro level by affecting households' ability to sustain their livelihoods and meet their daily needs such as food, access to clean water, education, clothing, and shelter. Lessons from the Ebola outbreak indicate that girls

become susceptible to risky behaviour because of economic hardships. In an Ebola study by Plan International, 88% of adults and children said they faced economic hardships, including lack of food. Girls were often forced into risky behaviour to put food on the table.^{xviii}

Mostly because of lockdowns, countries experienced a contraction in their economy because of a slow-down in key economic activities. A reduction in overall productivity affected most economies in the region, for example in **Zambia** there had been notable decline in the Zambia's Gross Domestic Product with estimates of (GDP) for the fourth quarter of 2020 showing contraction of the economy by 2.7 % from a 0.2 % growth in fourth quarter of 2019. This contraction in GDP was mainly attributed to the underperformance of five industries where negative postings on contributions to overall growth were recorded (Wholesale and retail trade (-2.4%), **Education** (-1.7%), Public administration (-1.1%), Accommodation and food (-0.6%) and Arts, entertainment, and recreation (-0.2%).^{xix} In 2019, the national debt of Zambia amounted to approximately 94.5% of the GDP. About 90% of the current budget (2021) of Zambia is going to debt servicing taking away resources going to social services including the education sector.^{xx}

In **Uganda** the real GDP declined by 0.5% in 2020, after growing 7.5% in 2019. Tourism and hospitality were severely hurt by global travel restrictions and local containment measures. Other sectors that were adversely affected include manufacturing, retail and wholesale trade, and **education**.^{xxi}

Meanwhile in **Rwanda** the real GDP was estimated to contract by 0.4% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, after growing 9.4% in 2019. Trade, transportation, and tourism services have been the sectors most affected by the global pandemic. COVID-19 also hurt investment and exports. Rising food prices, stoked by disruptions to regional and domestic supply chains, contributed to a 6.6% increase in inflation in 2020. Low tax yield and elevated health and social protection spending caused the fiscal deficit to grow to 8.3% of GDP in 2020, compared with 7.3% in 2019. The deficit was financed by COVID-19 budget support loans and grants from cooperating partners. Unemployment rate in Rwanda rose to 22.1% in May 2020, compared with 15% a year earlier. Unemployment growth reflects the virtual shutdown of such major industries as transport, food, and hospitality during the lockdown and is like to increase the poverty rate — which was 38.2% in 2017, the most recent data available.^{xxii}

In **Zimbabwe**, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued drought led to 10% contraction in real GDP in 2020. Inflation soared, averaging 622.8% in 2020, up from 226.9% in 2019. Foreign exchange reforms were instituted in June 2020, which dampened an inflation that raged an annual rate of 838% in July. Fiscal and current account deficits also recovered after July, but both deteriorated for the year. It is also noted that the Zimbabwe budget deficit rose from 2.7% in 2019 to 2.9% in 2020, while the current account went from a surplus of 1.1% of GDP in 2019 to a deficit of 1.9% in 2020. The exchange rate depreciated ZWL2.5 in February 2019 and stabilizing around ZWL82 to the US dollar in December 2020. Poverty stood at 70.5% in 2019 while unemployment remained high at over 21%.^{xxiii}

In **Egypt**, the tourism sector—which accounts for about 5.5% of GDP and 9.5% of employment—was shut down from mid-March to 1 July 2020. Despite pandemic-related expenditures and revenue shortfalls, the fiscal balance excluding the cost of government debt is expected to remain positive, at 0.5% of GDP. This fiscal buffer, a consequence of the fiscal

consolidation reforms, helped keep the overall deficit broadly unchanged at 8% of GDP in 2020—compared with a 7.9% deficit in 2019 that benefited from a primary surplus of 2%. Public debt was estimated to increase to 90.6% of GDP in 2020 from 86.6% in 2019, reversing three years of continuous decline. During the first half of 2020, exports dropped by 6%, while imports fell 21%, which helped narrow the current account deficit to 3.1% of GDP in 2020 from 3.6% the year before.^{xxiv}

The economic downturn faced by the evaluation focus countries as discussed above has led to governments having to develop new priorities aimed at stabilising respective national economies. This prioritisation process has stalled several efforts earmarked for improvements in the education sector and especially impact the adolescent girls and young women's access to quality learning. This impact has equally been reported at household level where regressing economies have exacerbated unemployment and increased poverty levels especially in rural areas. There are further indications that the contraction in economies shall impact efforts aimed at financing education interventions in respective countries.

Another impact was the *shift in household responsibilities* for providing for the family needs. This responsibility is usually reserved for parents or caregivers but with the impact of COVID-19, like loss of employment, young people, particularly adolescents and young women were co-opted into engaging in livelihood and caregiver roles for their household/family. As a result, this impacted their access to learning during this period by reducing their time to access education interventions.

“Since we had COVID-19, my parents have had economic challenges and this affected us as children, we are six in the family. As the oldest in the family, I was asked to help with economic activities of the family due to the gap that has been left in the family by this COVID-19.”—FGD, Rwanda (Adolescent Girls)

“We are not going to school and some of us are being asked to take part in chores at home when the boys go out for gambling. We are spending more time at home taking care of the house while the boys are allowed to go out and play.”—FGD, Zambia (Adolescent Girls)

Also, women and girls experienced heightened exposure to the virus due to their traditional roles as caregivers, looking after sick relatives and younger children.

Increased risk of Teenage/Unwanted Pregnancies and Gender Based Violence- following lockdowns and implementation of further restrictions, all the countries of focus experienced closure of schools at least once between March 2020 and March 2021. This resulted in disruption on learning particularly for adolescent girls and young women. School closures in response to crises, such as those experienced during the 2014-2016 West Africa Ebola outbreak and now COVID-19, further increase the chances that adolescent girls will be exposed to different forms of gender-based violence and the risk of teenage pregnancy where incidence of sexual violence has been heightened. During the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, school closures were shown to increase teenage pregnancies in some communities by as much as 65 per cent.^{xxv}
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According to UNFPA (2020), the adolescent birth rate per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 are outlined in the figure below.^{xxvii}

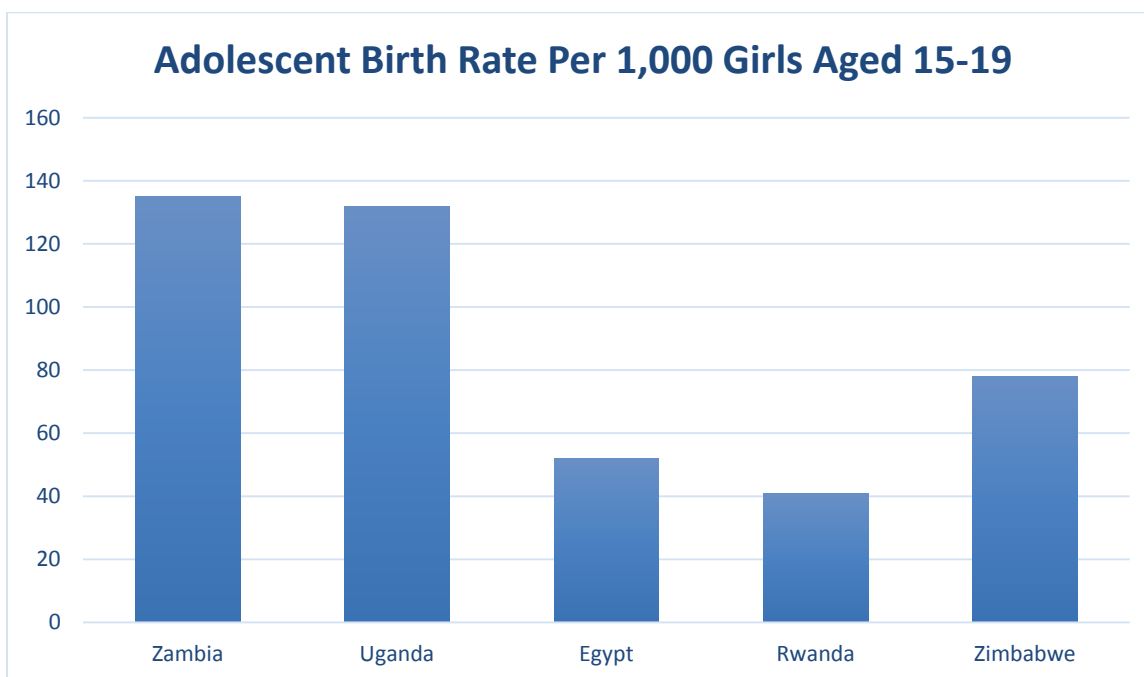


Figure 2: Adolescent birth rate per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 (UNFPA, 2020)^{xxviii}

Suggestions from previous pandemics like COVID-19 such as Ebola are that it is likely to increase the risk of teenage/unwanted pregnancies in the affected areas. This means that the countries indicated in figure 5 are likely to have a worse trend in the presentation of teenage pregnancies during COVID-19. This is mostly due to the risk of exposure for adolescents during a pandemic. In addition, there are indications that pandemics of this nature increase gender-based violence. Like Ebola, there are suggestions that adolescents and young women are likely to be victims of violence in the communities and households.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

As basis of the study several conclusions are critical to stress in understanding the impact of COVID-19 on access to quality learning for young people especially adolescent girls and young women.

Macro and micro impact: Firstly, the study reveals that the pandemic had both a macro and micro impact on the education sector. Based on the evaluation, countries of focus had to make shifts at national level in terms of policy and developed multisectoral strategies mitigating the impact of COVID-19. Particularly, the impact COVID-19 had on economies prompted governments to re-think prioritisation of development activities and to some extent took away efforts from the education sector. At micro level, household were impacted by the changes in key economic activities such as agriculture, tourism, entertainment, and manufacturing which had a ripple effect on loss of employment. The education sector cannot be seen in isolation of the rest of the challenges that countries are facing but combined in the analysis to develop weaved interventions as seen in the respective countries were multi-sectoral responses were preferred.

Community based interventions: Evidence from the evaluation indicate that community-based interventions helped to improved continued access to learning. Several strategies such as door-to-door, model households and community learning hubs as illustrated helped to enable learners to access some form of education. Although this approach is dependent on the existing community structures and leadership, there is generally an understanding that this this approach yields results in the education sector.

Multilevel vulnerabilities: COVID-19 and similar pandemics such as Ebola can exacerbate vulnerabilities among adolescent girls and young women. As a result of lockdowns, closure of schools and loss of employment and other factors, there has been an increase in the number of abuse cases being reported by adolescents and young women. This affirms a gendered impact of COVID-19 and lays bare the impact it has adolescent girls and young women's access to continued learning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings in this report, the following recommendations should be considered by governments and aid actors as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic or any other similar pandemic in the future to enable continued access to learning for adolescent girls and young women.

Enhance **multi-level and multisectoral response** for continued access to learning during a pandemic such as COVID-19 by strengthening education technical working groups working on continued access to learning. The response to be embedded in the national COVID-19 response management systems to ensure that the aid actors are part of decision-making process at all levels to strengthen **influence**.

Strengthen **financing for education** initiatives at both regional and domestic level through developing and/or maintaining financing platforms. Such initiatives should be earmarked for supporting most vulnerable groups such as adolescent girls and young women and young people living with disabilities.

Strengthen **community-based learning hubs** to enable access to learning for girls within their communities and catchment. Adopt community learning interventions across the region to leverage or strengthen already existing community structures.

Consideration of a **holistic (integrated) approach** to learning that includes Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) as a critical pillar in addition to SRH, Economic Empowerment, Protection, WASH etc. In addition to other interventions by the aid actors and government, it is important to include Public Health approaches to the education/learning portfolio. The inclusion of IPC for example, will be crucial for any future programming on learning especially when there is a pandemic.

Re-think **Gender transformative programming** which requires even more emphasis in a period of pandemic due to multi-layered vulnerabilities faced particularly by adolescent girls and women.

Leverage **Public and Private Partnership** aimed at enabling collaboration of education initiatives. For example, participation of ISP² and Mobile/Phone companies to support interventions that make use of technology. This effort can also be targeted at improving the internet access across rural/remote areas.

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