

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the educational inequalities in Tanzania

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Key Messages

- ☐ Educational inequalities between rich and poor are more pronounced than educational inequalities between rural-urban and girl-boy.
- ☐ Public primary schools in the rural districts were more significantly affected by COVID-19 lockdown measures that led to increased rural-urban educational inequalities.
- ☐ Private primary schools in the urban areas swiftly shifted to online learning.
- ☐ More than 50 percent of primary school children coming from poor households could not access online learning materials.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic brought considerable havoc in different societies and economies. In particular, the pandemic has exacerbated further educational inequalities at the lower level of education, primary education. Tanzania, just like the rest of the world, announced its first COVID-19 case in March 2020. The government intervened by announcing closures of public places like schools, places of worship, restaurants etc. Owing to COVID-19, the traditional face-to-face teaching practice was replaced by online learning. Schools opted to share the learning materials virtually while in other schools, teachers prepared learning materials and distributed them in hard copies to students through their parents. Essentially, learning from home was the new normal. According to Samnan et al. (2021), e-learning teaching method offers flexible teaching hours either remotely or on-site with limited interactions and disruptions. In this context, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) and the President's Office Regional Administration and Local Government (PORALG), developed the COVID-19 Education Sector Response and Recovery Plan in close collaboration with Education Development Partners like UNESCO, SIDA and UNICEF etc. On the other hand, there were private digital providers such as Kisarawe Shule Zetu, Shule Direct, Ubongo Kids who developed a toolkit that enabled users to filter and access online contents.

In collaboration with the Southern Voice, REPOA carried out a country-specific study to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the educational inequalities in the pre- during and post-COVID-19 periods focusing on the primary student's enrolment and learning behaviour, teacher's engagement, and the application of ICT. The study covered Dar es Salaam and Dodoma regions as case studies and data was collected using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with parents and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were administered to teachers and regional/ward educational officers.

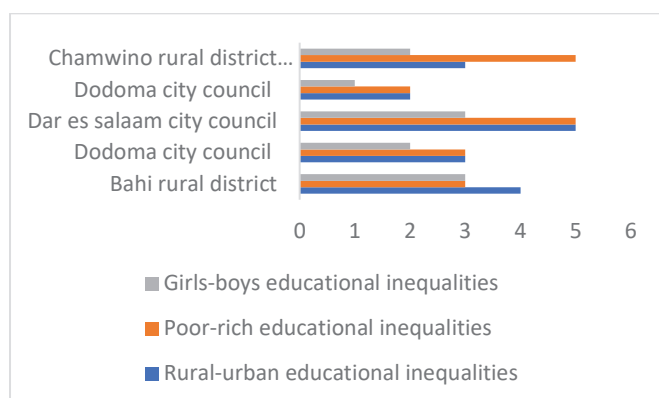
Key findings

Impact of COVID-19 on the educational inequalities

Educational inequality is assessed three dimensions of rural-urban, poor-rich and boy-girl (gender) components. Graph 1 indicates that on a scale of 0 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, the poor-rich educational inequalities scored 5. This implies that the impact of COVID-19 was highly felt by primary school children from poor households who struggled to continue with their studies compared to the children from rich households in Chamwino rural district and Dar es salaam city councils. This poor-rich educational inequality is followed by rural-urban educational inequalities that scored 5 for Dar es Salaam city council and 4 for Bahi rural district. Gender inequalities in the sense of girls being left for household chores instead of learning were minimal

relatively to the poor-rich and rural-urban inequalities.

Graph 1: Educational inequalities



Note: A scale of 0 being the lowest and 5 being the highest

Student's learning behaviour

Lockdown measures that resulted in remote learning caused considerable learning losses among primary school children, especially in the rural districts. Thus, an important observation about online learning is that to a larger extent, it is not inclusive given the fact that most of the children from poor households cannot afford to access not only the internet, but also TVs, radios and smart phones., on one hand. On the other hand, children situated in the rural areas have limited internet connectivity due to limited financial resources allocated for rural districts to improve ICT-enabled infrastructure and learning facilities. Generally, schools were initially disorganised to effectively use virtual teaching methods. Moreover, there was no channel to follow-up or ask questions or clarifications because the assignments were shared through the TV, radio, or WhatsApp groups. This disconnect between parents, teachers and students created educational inequality. As highlighted by one official from Dodoma region: "...Children from poor families were unable to access lessons through television, radios, or digital devices."

On average, children spent between 1 and 2 hours per day on learning activities during the height of the pandemic. The learning modalities employed during the lockdown period included text messages, phone calls, emails, and video lessons, which had both advantages and challenges depending upon the resource availability.

FGD participant 1 appreciated the access to learning materials from various sources: "...The online learning

modality facilitated access of learning materials from different schools and networks". However, many parents expressed concerns about the effectiveness of these methods". While FGD participant 6 noted that, "...There was no monitoring whether pupils pay attention to the radio and/or Television programmes or not".

Many parents also expressed concerns about the costs and disadvantages of these learning modalities. For instance, the online learning method increased the cost of printing home packages and transportation costs for those without smartphones. Additionally, FGD participant 1 mentioned scheduling conflicts between different TV stations: "...The Television programmes were not well organised between one TV station and the other. Some children watched other TV programmes instead of academic programmes."

In more rural areas such as Bahi district council, the short-lived lockdown did not have a significant impact on students' enthusiasm towards learning. However, the learning modalities used during this time still affected the students unequally. The differing levels of student engagement during the pandemic and the various challenges faced by parents and students underscore the importance of investing further in addressing educational inequalities in Tanzania.

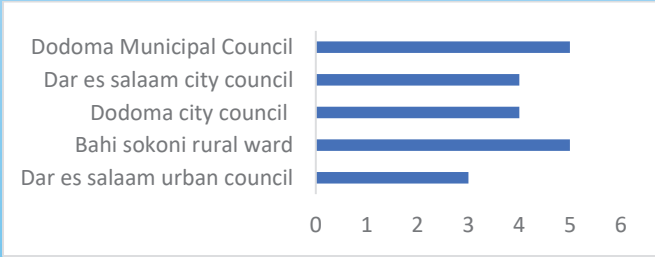
Teacher's engagement

COVID-19 led to the rethinking of the role of technology as an alternative to the traditional face-to-face teaching practices. Technology played a significant role amid the unfolding of the pandemic that imposed stringent containment measures of social distancing and lockdowns around the globe. The findings reveal disparities in teaching engagement between private and public schools in Dar es Salaam. Private schools such as Answar Private School and Deepsea Private School employed innovative approaches including home packages and recorded video lessons to facilitate learning at home. Teachers at Answar Private School prepared home packages every Saturday and distributed them to every pupil one by one through door-to-door visits. In addition, teachers in the school recorded lessons via video clips of science subjects for standard seven, which were shared with pupils through a WhatsApp group of parents and teachers. The use of technology in teaching enabled teachers to reach about 70% of pupils via smartphones/WhatsApp, which was a significant boost to their teaching methods.

In Chamwino rural district, the Ward Education Officer (WEO) highlighted that only head teachers and academic teachers have access to computers or tablets. However, their usage was infrequent and limited to typing and marking exams. Bahimisheni and Ibihwa public schools in Bahi and Ibihwa rural districts had low engagement in teaching activities during the pandemic. The lack of preparation by these schools and the technological barriers prevented students, especially those from poor households, from benefiting from technologically assisted teaching methods. However, Ngombolola primary school in Ibihwa ward had moderate teaching engagement that encouraged students to continue learning from home, thereby cushioning the learning losses from COVID-19 pandemic.

As highlighted in graph 2, respondents from both urban and rural district councils strongly agree that digital devices amplified educational inequalities during the pandemic. Additionally, a male teacher from Mlowa Barabarani ward in Dodoma and a female teacher from Kigogo ward in Dar es Salaam identified community unpreparedness in using technology for virtual or distance learning as a major factor worsening educational inequalities. Key informants from Dodoma shared their concerns about the challenges of the online learning method including students' unpreparedness to adapt to new learning methods, which contributed to school dropouts and teenage pregnancies. FGD participants in Bahisokoni rural district further raised an interesting argument that“...access to technology does not guarantee improved performance, citing instances where rural district councils and low-income students outperformed their urban and wealthier counterparts.”

Graph 2: Digital device amplifying educational inequalities

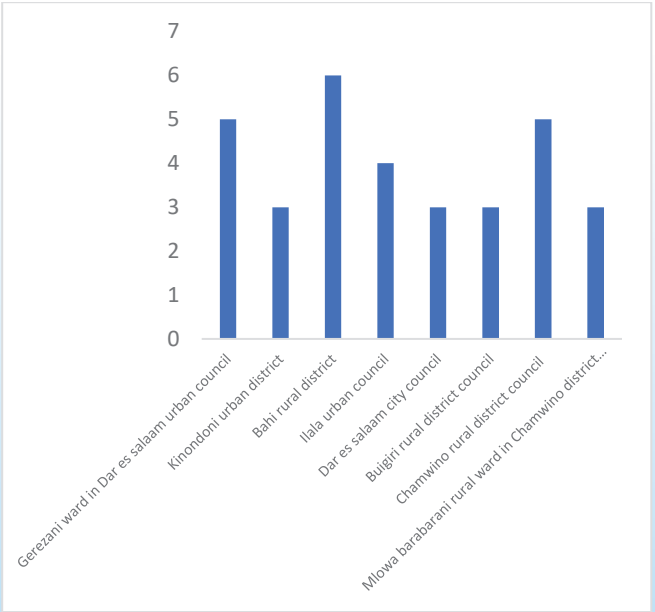


Note: 0 (strongly agree) and 10 (strongly disagree)

As indicated in Graph 3, more than 90 percent of the respondents strongly agree that technology amplified educational inequalities except for Bahi rural district council. Thus, the integration of

technology in primary education is still very low. Most of the primary schools lack ICT-enabled learning facilities to allow virtual learning. For instance, in Kigogo ward, out of four schools, only two schools have computers. On the other hand, private schools already had well-established computer labs and well-versed ICT teachers before COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, private schools had proper communication with parents physically and via WhatsApp groups as part of a daily follow-up regarding the progress of their children.

Graph 3: Technology is amplifying educational inequalities



Note: An average was used for the parent’s FGDs in Kinondoni urban district, Bahi rural district, Ilala urban council, Mlowa barabarani rural ward. From 0 (strongly agree) to 10 (strongly disagree).

Conclusion & Policy recommendations

The effects of COVID-19 on the educational inequalities have laid bare the pre-COVID-19 existing challenges in the educational sector at the primary level. During the pandemic, private primary schools swiftly shifted to online learning unlike public primary schools. This implies that the private schools have significantly invested on improving their facilities and services to enable their students cope with the increasingly modernised world. These differences in response to COVID-19 created education inequalities between rural-urban, and rich-poor households, and between public and private schools. This study outlines three policy recommendations as follows:

Investing more on the education sector

Primarily, investing in world-class quality of education enhances the quality of the human capital in the population which is key for achieving a high Human Development Index. Moreover, allocating more resources to the education sector is necessary for inclusivity given the fact that most of the primary schools in the rural districts lack basic learning facilities for creating a conducive learning environment for both children and teachers in terms of quality classrooms, teaching materials, reliable utilities, ICT facilities and improved teacher's incentives.

Digitalisation of the Educational sector

The outbreak of covid-19 is a call for action from the Government. Through the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the Government should review the ICT Education Policy to improve on the integration of Education Technology (EdTech) or e-learning in the primary education system. It will help children to familiarise themselves with the modern ways of learning at an early stage and improve learning outcomes for both teachers and students. Furthermore, the Government should capacitate teachers on the use of computers to enable them to carry out virtual teachings in the future. Long-term plans should include attaining the *One Laptop Per Child target* while aligning the country's policies with the UN's Sustainable Development Goal four for inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

Effective engagement of the private sector

The private sector has a pivotal role to play in ensuring inclusive access to digital platforms to minimize educational inequalities. However, this will be possible with effective partnership in the form of Private-Public Partnerships to narrow the educational gaps that exist between public and private schools in the urban and rural areas.

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