Chapter 5
Access and Inclusivity in Education: Addressing the Barriers for the Most Disadvantaged and Marginalised in Times of Pandemics

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5.1 Background and context

5.1.1 International agreements

Over the past 30 years, national governments have acknowledged that educational opportunities are limited for a significant proportion of the world's population. This situation is recognised in international agreements and national policies adopted by Commonwealth and other countries, including the World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs (UNESCO 1990), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO 1994), The Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments (UNESCO 2000), and the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO 2016). The adoption in 2015 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs]) (UN General Assembly 2015) emphasised the inter-relationship between factors, including poverty, poor healthcare facilities, inadequate education, and environmental degradation and conflict, which have led to disadvantage and marginalisation for individuals and communities.

The current pandemic is placing an economic burden on governments that may negatively impact their ability to maintain progress towards attaining the SDGs. This is a situation that will need to be carefully monitored by organisations concerned about education and the rights of children and young people.

Each of these international agreements indicates a commitment to provide universal access to primary education and to increase opportunities for those of school age who have been identified as marginalised and denied an opportunity to learn through formal schooling. These disadvantaged populations have been identified as those with disabilities, refugees, ethnic minorities, girls, and others living in poverty or subject to discrimination on the grounds of caste, class or religion. Learners, families and communities thus categorised have often been subjected to discrimination and exclusion from the social, educational and welfare rights identified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948), The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006).

A succession of global monitoring reports issued by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) indicate that some progress has been made towards achieving a commitment to provide universal primary education for all, but that this has often taken place at a much slower pace than might have been anticipated. The most recent of these reports (UNESCO 2020b), presents several continuing challenges that indicate the pervasive disadvantages faced by many families. Among the most disturbing facts identified in this report, is the indication that in all but the wealthiest countries, mainly those in Europe and North America, only 18 of those in the poorest sections of the school-age population manage to complete secondary school for every 100 of those from wealthy families. In many sub-Saharan African nations, hardly any poor rural young women complete secondary education. An estimated 258 million children, adolescents and youth – equating to 17 per cent of the world's school-age learners – do not attend school. In sub-Saharan Africa, the number is continuing to grow. This is a situation that cannot be addressed by educators alone. Rather, it demands a commitment from professionals across all services and will require continued collaboration between governments, NGOs, and other individuals and organisations who proclaim a belief in social justice and equity.

5.1.2 Moves towards inclusive education

National governments, including those in all Commonwealth countries, have considered the promises made in successive international agreements and have formulated policies to promote inclusive education. Policy alone cannot address the issues faced by families and children who are excluded from educational opportunity. Essential elements to create a just society include a more cohesive approach to the fair distribution of resources and expertise; changes in the training of teachers and other professionals to develop knowledge, skills and understanding suitable for the creation of inclusive learning environments; and the development of partnerships between

education establishments, industry and commercial interests. A piecemeal approach to addressing the challenges of exclusion – whereby individuals or groups have a narrow focus of interest, such as disability or poverty – is in evidence in many countries. If brought together to share in development work, these interest groups could have a far greater impact.

It should not be assumed that passing legislation and implementing policy will bring about the desired changes in the lives of marginalised children and families. Many countries have developed excellent policies that have faced obstacles, and in some cases opposition, that has inhibited their impact. In India, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2009) indicates the government's commitment to universal primary education. The legislation is well constructed and well-intentioned but has encountered anxiety in many elements of the education system in India, notably among those who provide education to children from the more advantaged sectors of society. The problem is largely concerns expressed by parents who pay for their children to attend schools, that an influx of those who may have difficulties could demand too much attention from teachers and thus limit the opportunities of their own children. Concerns have also been expressed about the limited training and experience of teachers, who are now being asked to teach classes of greater diversity. Here and in other countries, we can see increasing opposition to the concept of inclusive education. This is a fair indication of the lack of confidence seen in many teachers in their ability to address the needs of a diverse population of learners. Evidence from research conducted in several Commonwealth countries, shows that lack of teacher preparedness for inclusion is a major issue (Shah et al. 2013 [India]; Kamau and Wilson 2017 [Kenya]; Otukile-Mongwaketse et al. 2016 [Botswana]; Nketsia et al. 2016 [Ghana]).

The slow rate of progress towards inclusive education in many countries cannot detract from the high level of commitment to social justice shown by many teachers. Positive attitudes to diversity are critical for progress to be achieved, and there are undoubtedly some barriers to be crossed in this area. However, attitudes improve when teachers gain greater confidence in their ability to teach successfully in inclusive classrooms, and they deserve greater support if they are to be expected to succeed (Rose and Doveston 2015). Examples of successful innovations to promote inclusive education can be seen across the world, including from those countries that are often identified as struggling to achieve universal provision (West 2015; Watkins and Meijer 2016; Singal et al. 2019). Such examples can provide the foundation for further developments for the benefit of children, teachers and families.

Understanding the issues surrounding inclusive education requires focused research (Amor et al. 2019). The researchers who have contributed case

studies to this report are well positioned to provide further insights into the challenges faced by teachers, children and families that have led to exclusion and to provide examples of how these might be overcome. Research-informed practice can instil confidence in professionals about what might be achieved as we look to providing a better future for all learners.

5.2 Survey methodology and findings

5.2.1 Overview of research project

From the outset of this project, it was important to establish research questions and ensure these would be practicable in terms of the limited time and resources available for the research process. The following two research questions were agreed:

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the educational opportunities of those of school age in this specific population? (with each researcher identifying a sample from one marginalised group within their country)

- What measures, if any, have been taken to support children from this population to access education at this time?

The research reported in this chapter consists of a series of summarised case studies, each of which looks to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the educational opportunities afforded to children and their families, based on data obtained from representatives of marginalised groups. In addition, each case study provides insights into a unique situation defined by the country from which the data were gathered, and on a specific population sample – for example, migrant workers or girls.

While it would seem fair to assume that COVID-19 has had a detrimental effect on children and families in situations of disadvantage, as has been the case in other national and international crises, the novel situation of a pandemic requires evidence to confirm this. Research of this nature must focus on asking questions and gathering data to inform situational interpretations. While we may hypothesise the impact of the pandemic, it is important to avoid generalised statements until such time as data has been acquired, analysed and interpreted.

In order to conduct research of this nature it was important from the outset to establish some agreed definitions for the terminology used by the individual researchers and those who were providing mentoring and support. See below:

- **Inclusivity (inclusion).** Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and

communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all learners (UNESCO 2005,13).

- **Disadvantaged**. Disadvantaged individuals or groups are those who are denied access to those rights and opportunities that are available to the majority of their peers. Disadvantage may result from attitudes to disability, culture, ethnicity, religion, caste, class, religion, socioeconomic status, gender, migration status and displacement, or sexuality. It often results from conditions of poverty, but can also be related to natural or human-made catastrophes (such as warfare, earthquakes or pandemics).

- **Marginalised**. People are marginalised when they are either denied an opportunity to voice their opinions or lack the ability or authority to express their views to those who have control over their lives. Such situations result in denial of access to human rights and those conditions that enable individuals or groups of people to live with dignity within their communities.

- **Pandemic**. A pandemic is a disease outbreak that spreads across countries or continents. It affects more people and takes more lives than an epidemic.

Timetable

The time allocated for this project was determined by JET in consultation with the Commonwealth Secretariat, the [commissioning agency]. The urgent need to understand the impact of COVID-19 on marginalised groups and the limitations of available resources inevitably limited the time available for conducting the study, and of necessity-imposed restrictions on both the sample sizes that could realistically be established and the methods of data collection open to researchers. This was an important consideration when designing the research approach.

Over a six-week period, researchers were allocated a series of tasks that enabled them to identify a focus for their research, select a purposive sample, develop a research instrument, familiarise themselves with appropriate literature, gather and analyse data, and write a case study. This was a demanding task, which would have been challenging even for experienced researchers and required a high level of commitment and diligence on the part of each participating researcher. The thematic lead and co-lead maintained contact with the researchers throughout this period, offering

advice and encouragement as necessary. A weekly online meeting involving all researchers and supporters was used to review progress, set and discuss tasks, and provide encouragement to the researchers.

Case study format

In the early days of the project, it was agreed that a case study format would provide a sound foundation within which the researchers could work, and that this would enable them to locate information within an agreed template as their work progressed. This template allowed for some flexibility but aimed to give researchers a structure that would enable them to make progress throughout the time of the project rather than having the challenge of designing a report format at the conclusion of their work.

In many of the countries in which data were collected, the marginalised or vulnerable populations form a numerically significant percentage of those in school. This situation varied across the countries and was influential in enabling the researchers to select their population of focus. The format below established for the case studies included context (description of country and pandemic response); research sample (description of population studied, why selected and where located); method (research instrument, how it was applied, how data were analysed, ethics etc.); findings (what study revealed, relevant literature); and challenges/ recommendations.

Data collection, analysis and reporting

The method for data collection and the approach to fieldwork were determined by each individual researcher. Conducting fieldwork in the time of a pandemic inevitably presented several challenges, with the requirements of social distancing and imposed lockdown situations restricting opportunities for face-to-face interactions. The researchers each designed an instrument with this challenge in mind and established a sample based on accessibility, safety and relevance to the research questions. In addition, each researcher conducted a search and literature review related to their chosen study area. Table 5.1 indicates the sample established by each researcher and the primary methods of data collection used during each project.

The researchers managed and interpreted the data using thematic analysis approach. In this way, they were able to identify key issues that were impacting the lives of students and their families, and those measures adopted by national governments to minimise disruption to learning. The majority chose to manage data manually using the electronic software package NVIVO QSR 1999 (QSR International 1999). Summary findings from the research are presented below.

Table 5.1 Research sample and primary data collection instruments

Researcher	Country	Defined sample	Primary data collection instruments
Paul Habineza	Rwanda	Children in poor households	Telephone interviews
Timothy Dziedzom Amaglo-Mensah and Kenneth Gyamerah	Ghana	Girls	Interviews
Itumeleng Thabang Moiphisi	Botswana	Children preparing for public examinations in rural communities	Interviews
Hoimawati Talukdar	India	Children of migrant workers	Interviews
Isaac Yeboah	Ghana	Children of migrant workers	Questionnaire/interviews
Melvin Sharty	Sierra Leone	Adolescent Girls	Interview/questionnaire
Dawud Suleiman	Nigeria	Children living in poverty	Interviews

Research ethics

All researchers were required to abide by a code of practice established for this project. Additional documentation for obtaining informed consent and gaining ethical approval was provided by JET Educational Services. Ethical considerations were managed by JET Educational Services and, following consultation, between the theme lead and a University Research Ethics Committee.

5.2.2 Overall findings from the case studies

The full case studies provided details of the context, methods, findings and recommendations from each individual researcher.

The small-scale nature of the research meant that findings could be generalised to a wider population. However, they did provide important illustrations of the current situation for significantly disadvantaged individuals, whose access to education and other services had been severely disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, they provided an indication of the need for both supportive action and more research in this area.

An analysis of emerging themes from the national case studies enabled a series of commonalities and exceptionalities to be identified. Rose and Shevlin (2014, 115) define these two terms as follows:

- **Commonalities:** Phenomena that are seen to be common across cases and might therefore be used to formulate 'fuzzy generalisations'.

- **Exceptionalities:** Phenomena that were seen in single cases and cannot therefore be generalised beyond the specific location.

In research of this nature, where the samples are purposive and the sample size is small, it is not possible to generalise findings beyond the study locale. However, the consistency with which some issues arise did enable 'fuzzy generalisation', whereby interpretation of the data provided an indication that implied that a finding was common to a few locations, and therefore *may be* typical of that situation. An example within the studies reported here was the finding that e-learning material was not reaching the rural and remote parts of the country or people living in poverty. This was due to lack of internet facilities and technology such as mobile phones and laptops/computers, television and radio. This was reported from Botswana, Ghana, India, Nigeria and Rwanda.

Table 5.2 identifies commonalities across the case studies with respect of the educational challenges faced by marginalised learners and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These commonalities allowed us to draw some conclusions from the research and these are presented later in this chapter. Some of the commonalities may

Table 5.2 Commonalities among the study countries

	Common features	Countries where issue was recorded
1.	Burden on parents to find alternative learning modes	Nigeria, Sierra Leone
2.	Adolescent girls at higher risk of educational exclusion or sexual exploitation due to COVID-19	Ghana, Sierra Leone
3.	Government plans in place for inclusive education, but limited funds to execute the plans	India, Nigeria, Sierra Leone
4	E-learning material not reaching rural/remote parts of the country and people living in poverty due to lack of internet facilities and technology such as mobile phones and laptop/computers, television and radio	Botswana, Ghana, India, Nigeria, Rwanda
5	The lower the income of parents, the higher the chances of their children not performing well in their studies	India, Nigeria
6	Illiteracy of parents contributed to lack of support for learning at home	Botswana, India, Nigeria
7	Lack of power supply/electricity inhibited ability to study at home	Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda
8	Migrant workers lived in poorly constructed temporary structures/ feared of eviction from the places they lived in	Ghana, India
9	During the pandemic, migrant workers went back to their hometowns and lacked education support	Ghana, India
10.	Inequality in support systems and facilities due to the rural–urban divide	Botswana, Ghana, India, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone

in fact have been found in the other case studies, but as the focus of each project differed this was not always obvious.

In addition to the commonalities identified by the researchers, there was also a range of exceptionalities which appeared to be specific and relevant to individual countries. The following summaries/statements for each country are drawn directly from the full case studies.

Botswana

The study was conducted among students staying in Molepolole who came from the nearby land or cattle posts such as Mosokotso, Dikgonnyane and Katswana. These students were mainly transported by donkey cart to and from classes.

The participants were chosen by simple random sampling in order to give every student an equal chance of being chosen. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that there was equal representation of gender and intellectual abilities. Purposive sampling was also used to choose teachers. A total of ten participants took part in the study: three from primary school, three from junior school and four from senior secondary school.

Botswana's public schools usually have very large classes of 40–45 students per class. This had the potential to increase the risk of transmission of COVID-19, should there be any cases in the classroom. To ensure that there was social distancing and thus reduced contact in the classroom, each class was divided into two, that is 20–25 students per class. This resulted in hiring more teachers to assist with the extra classes. The division also led to classes being divided into morning and afternoon shifts, with each class lasting four hours.

Students expressed concerns about the situation resulting from the pandemic and its likely impact on their examination results and their ability to learn. Comments obtained in student interviews included:

> The lockdown has really affected us; we have been out of school for two months. I am worried that we may not be able to finish the syllabus.

> The four hours shift is really not working for us as students; teachers are forced to rush through topics. Sometimes we do not understand but because of time, we are unable to spend more time on the topic.

> I completely forgot what was taught in the first time. I was too anxious to study because I was scared that we might die from corona.

Teachers expressed similar concerns:

> The two months' lockdown has really affected our lessons delivery; we are forced to rush through the syllabus so that we can be able to finish it and revise with our students.

Our students are really not prepared for the exams. I am really worried on whether they will be able to pass, despite the little time they have and the amount of work that still needs to be covered.

Learning at home was seen to be particularly challenging when support was limited, because of poor literacy among household members.

Staying at the cattle post or lands has its disadvantage in that we stay with our grandmothers who are illiterate. This makes it difficult for them to assist us with schoolwork when we get stuck.

As in other countries, access to online learning or accessing lessons through the media was problematic. One student stated:

I stay at the land or cattle post. There is no electricity there, so we do not have a television. The only time I got to watch a television is when I have the money to visit my friends in Molepolole to study with them.

And similar concerns were expressed by another:

Students who have had access to the online materials are better off than us, because they are able to use channels such as YouTube to access learning materials. Those of us who do not have the internet cannot access such.

One student felt that she had a solution to the difficulties of access, but that this had not been considered:

I feel that because we are not many, lessons should have been arranged for us at the local kgotla [court/meeting place] so that [we could] study and also watch the study programmes that were provided online.

The case study summarised issues, stating that equitable distribution of resources was important for any thriving society. This included strengthening access to resources for marginalised groups. These groups were often left behind because they did not have access. Students in marginalised areas complained about the lack of resources, which made it difficult for them to perform well in school. Thus, ensuring all students had access to the same resources would contribute to improved learner performance.

Ghana (1)

The population investigated in the first case study from Ghana was a sample of girls in government senior high schools. The rationale for choosing girls specifically for this study was based on the evidence that in every humanitarian crisis, girls' education was severely impacted (UNICEF 2016; Save the Children 2015; Malala Fund 2020). In the Ghanaian context, girls faced several cultural and systemic barriers to participation in education.

The researchers recruited 11 girls as samples for the case study. Of this sample, five participants resided in rural areas, one participant lived in an

inner city and the rest were from urban communities. A qualitative approach was adopted, with primary data collected via semi-structured interviews carried out remotely.

Summary findings were as follows:

In terms of academic support and engagement, most of the girls received most academic engagement and support from their parents and/or siblings, rather than from their teachers and schools.

A majority claimed COVID-19 had brought negative changes in their lives: uncertainty, panic, stress, and increased anxiety. One girl said:

> *The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a drastic change in all aspects of human lives. Be it, education, financial aspect, religious organisations, our extended family gatherings and even our personal lives as well.*

In terms of mental health and well-being, most of the girls had also experienced some form of anxiety, nervousness, stress and discomfort, which has affected their motivation to study. One participant said:

> *It has disrupted my studies. I no longer feel enthused to study hard as I used to. I also feel anxious of contracting the virus.*

In terms of lack of access to remote or distance learning and digital devices, the girls in rural communities were disproportionately affected. Conversely, all the girls who lived in urban and the peri-urban areas asserted they had access to TV and radio at home and they were able to join some national remote learning programmes. The girls from the urban and peri-urban areas also acknowledged that they had personal computers and smartphones; however, most rural girls did not. One girl in a rural context stated:

> *the government should provide computers and internet to students to make learning easier.*

> *From our findings, it was clear that although girls fell within the at-risks and vulnerable groups who might be left behind during this educational crisis, those in urban and peri-urban contexts had a better chance of benefitting from some alternative education programmes compared to those in rural communities.*

Ghana (2)

The second Ghana case study focused on female migrant workers residing and working in peri-urban communities in Greater Accra. Survey interviews were conducted in households or the marketplace. The researcher used purposive sampling and was able to interview 32 respondents.

The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection increased cash transfers under the LEAP (Livelihoods Empowerment Against Poverty)

programme across poor households in Ghana to help girls return to school. LEAP is a social cash transfer programme that seeks to reduce poverty by promoting basic household consumption, basic school enrolment, attendance and retention, and access to healthcare services and opportunities among extremely poor and vulnerable households in Ghana. The LEAP programme is predominantly active in poor households in rural areas.

Although the Ghanaian government instituted a number of digital initiatives to support learning during the pandemic, most female migrant workers to urban areas (whose origins were rural areas in Ghana) lacked the infrastructure necessary to support online learning. Therefore, their children were denied access to the government's virtual learning initiative. As one mother indicated in the interview:

> My child is not in school, so I don't know if the government gave such intervention. Besides, we don't have electricity here [female migrant worker, 26 years].

The dispersal of migrant workers led to a situation of considerable confusion. A female migrant worker explained that during the lockdown, most of the women returned to their place of origin:

> Most people left during the corona lockdown. We were left with only about four families here. Those left here were not so many [female migrant worker, 18 years].

Those who returned home faced the challenge of inadequate educational resources and a lack of opportunities to continue their learning:

> My child is with the father in our village [in northern Ghana]. In our village, they have constructed nice school buildings but there are no teachers to teach them. During the COVID-19 pandemic, none of them are going to school. They are all at home [female migrant worker, 32 years].

Those migrant workers who did not return home faced many challenges. In an in-depth interview, one of the respondents explained that amidst a constant threat of evacuation from her home, it was not possible to gain the same level of income as before the pandemic. She also explained that they were suffering oppression from those in positions of authority:

> The market is not good at all. The people [local authorities] have been coming here to sack us from here. They take our belongings outside our rooms. When it rains too, you need to be awake until the rain stops before you can sleep – you and the child. That is what is worrying us [female migrant worker, 17 years].

All the female migrants interviewed confirmed that they did not benefit from the government's initiative of distributing free food. This could possibly

have been influenced by the mass return of female migrant workers to the northern region. The responses to this issue from two interviewees were revealing:

> We didn't get some [food]. They didn't bring the foodstuffs here. They always come here to write our names, but they don't give us anything [female migrant worker, 19 years].

> No, we didn't receive some of government's food here. We left to the northern region. They sometimes come here to sack us here. And we don't know where to sleep [female migrant worker, 21 years].

In all, it was observed that little was done by the government and other civil society organisations to protect respondents during and after the COVID-19 lockdown. COVID-19 had severely exposed them and their children to social, economic and health inequality in Ghanaian society. Their plight was seen but not heard. The needs and interests of female migrant workers and their children were largely absent from mainstream debates on gender, child protection and inclusive education.

India

The reason for selecting Uttar Pradesh (UP) in India as the focus of this research was that media reports suggested a large number of migrant workers whose sufferings and hardships had come to the fore were from UP and Bihar. The place chosen for the study was the village of Chithera in Dadri district, Gautam Buddha Nagar in UP. Interviews were conducted with 12 women migrant workers aged between 19 and 60 years. The women worked as garden labourers. They were asked about the issues they faced in their workplace, their level of literacy and their children's education. Their children (a group of 25) were aged 2 to 18 years.

The data had to be collected directly from the migrant workers, who because of poverty and high levels of illiteracy did not possess mobile phones. The lockdown presented a difficulty as most migrant workers could not come to their workplace. So, the data reported in this research was limited to that collected in two weeks of fieldwork. The research instrument developed for the study was an unstructured interview. The data was analysed using a qualitative approach of thematic analysis and interpretation.

For migrant workers, education had not been prioritised. However, the changing nature of the economy and their appreciation of the fact that education leads to a decent salary had motivated these workers to send their children to school. The hope was that the children would not have to undertake the kind of manual labouring jobs that their parents were doing. This may indicate a shift in focus among the migrant worker parents, who had previously seen little option but to adopt their current lifestyle.

One of the Indian interviewees stated:

> *If we don't work, we won't get food for survival, education comes later. So, our focus has always been on earning for survival, [the] rest comes later.*

The provision of a midday meal had had a considerable impact upon school attendance in India. When children were in school, the provision of this meal took pressure off families to ensure some aspects of good nutrition for their children. It was therefore unsurprising that a parent should emphasise the importance of 'food for survival' at a time when her children were out of school as a result of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis left these children without any form of education, despite being enrolled in school. From March 2020 onwards, when the schools were forced to close down, they had no teaching–learning form of education. This was a huge gap, considering the length of time they were kept away from their studies without any access to digital platforms. The uncertainty about when schools would reopen loomed large. The children had lost interest in education and that interest would be hard to regain.

In addition to lack of access to online classes, electricity was provided for only a few fixed hours in the rural areas. Worse still was the issue of parental illiteracy: parents were not aware that the government had provided e-learning platforms (such as Swayam, E-Vidya and E-Pathshala). Understanding about online education was still a long way ahead for them. It was only by educating them on the recent trends in education that their children would improve their education and be able to reach the same level as children from privileged classes.

It was anticipated that a different set of problems could face the children of migrant workers when the pandemic ended. The Director of Policy, Research and Advocacy, Child Rights and You (CRY) suggested:

> *The recent traumatic experiences may affect their learning outcome and eventually affect their retention in school. School administration will need to provide special attention and counselling services to these children.*

Nigeria

The focus of the case study from Nigeria was children living in poverty. Nigeria has the highest rate of child poverty in sub-Saharan Africa (World Data Lab projections 2019).

The study relied on qualitative primary research and a desktop literature review. Primary data was collected using structured interviews, while the secondary data was based upon desktop research. The research interviews were conducted in Tudun Wada. This is a small urban area located in Zaria, Kaduna State, in the north-western region of Nigeria. A simple random

sampling technique was employed. The sample size was just six; due to lockdown, the researcher chose to focus more on the literature review. Data were obtained using questionnaires and a structured interview method.

Under normal circumstances, qualitative data would have been obtained in face-to-face interviews or focus groups. The limitations on travel and the necessity to maintain social distancing had a profound effect upon this process. The researcher resorted to digital communication: use of the telephone and other desk-based approaches to conduct their studies.

The main findings from this case study were as follows:

There were insufficient textbooks available to enable children to study either at home or school. Schools were often far from homes, with no transport facilities available to assist children to attend.

Children living in poverty were more likely to stop their education completely during the pandemic. This was one of the biggest issues affecting children living in poverty. They had no additional support from the schools or even the teachers. This was because most of them were only able to afford to attend public schools, which were often far behind in terms of access to basic infrastructure and resources. As a result, they could not afford to organise extra support for their students and teachers as some private schools did.

The most severe issues faced by children living in poverty arose from their parents' lack of money. Even under normal circumstances, many respondents had to trek long distances to school every day, without any proper midday meal arrangements. This made learning difficult and further discouraged children from going to school, thereby increasing their marginalisation.

Many children living in poverty studied for only a few hours during the pandemic: an average of one or two hours daily. Most of this studying was less intense and serious than learning in school. Many participants also confirmed that there was no proper structured timetable, which made it difficult to maintain consistency and focus. According to one participant:

> My parents send me on errand at times when [I am] reading and I will just stop everything.

This was another reason children only learned for a few hours each day.

Rwanda

The research sample was selected from a marginalised vulnerable community, which was part of the COVID-19 economic relief programme. Due to limited time and limited resources, 50 professional teachers were selected from the Nyarugenge district of the city of Kigali because it had more accurate information on the effect of COVID-19 on vulnerable child learners. The school had many young vulnerable pupils.

The research tools consisted of sets of questions and instructions on how they should be answered. Telephonic responses to questions were obtained and unstructured interviews were used for data collection.

Rwanda was still recovering from the genocide against the Tutsi population that took place in 1994, which destroyed the entire social and economic fabric of the country. The war and genocide left approximately 1 million child-headed households. Some of the children had since grown up or been absorbed into other households, but most of them still faced a higher burden of responsibility and work than their peers. During the pandemic, it was difficult for such households to prioritise education or maintain the quality of education that learners were receiving before the pandemic.

All respondents strongly agreed that the coronavirus had an effect on the education of vulnerable learners. Of the respondents, 70 per cent confirmed that support from television, YouTube channels and radio teaching programmes was not affordable or could not be accessed by vulnerable child learners.

The use of radio and television as a main support for students unable to attend school during the pandemic was seen as a positive move by the government. However, it was suggested that the most vulnerable students were likely to live in communities that lacked access to electricity, and they were therefore disadvantaged compared to their wealthier peers.

Sierra Leone

The case study sample population in Sierra Leone was adolescent girls aged 10–19 years. The sample was selected from the 2015 Sierra Leone Population and Housing Census report (Statistics Sierra Leone (SSL) 2017).

The case study used a qualitative approach to analyse data collected from principal secondary sources that applied to key research questions. Data was collected from online searches of key institutions, including the Ministry of Basic Senior and Secondary Education (MBSSE).

In Sierra Leone, public and private schools had reopened across the country by the time of the research. However, this was only for pupils and students who were preparing for public examinations, therefore excluding many thousands of children from school.

Key findings were as follows:

- Adolescent girls were at higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, being forced into early marriages and suffering female genital cutting. Thousands of adolescent girls were also left vulnerable to unwanted sex and transactional sex for food and other essentials. This saw more than 18,000 girls fall pregnant.

- The COVID-19 crisis was accentuating existing risks and bringing additional risks of gender inequality, gender-based violence (GBV) and adolescent pregnancy as young girls faced greater expectations to care for children and relatives at home instead of studying and teaching. They were more prone to domestic abuse without regular access to school, teachers, and other support systems in the community.

- The Sierra Leone government had put comprehensive safety guidelines in place in terms of access and inclusivity, with four pillars that addressed (i) communications, (ii) continuous distance learning, (iii) school reopening readiness, and (iv) operations, planning and policy.

- The Sierra Leone government was incurring additional expenses because of the pandemic to supply personal protective equipment and water to schools; fund radio learning programmes; and finance additional costs associated with providing extra remedial classes (especially for examination classes).

- A plan had been developed that covered school-, community- and system-level interventions to bring girls back to school post-pandemic. It was hoped this would enable pregnant girls and young mothers who had dropped out to re-enter formal education. Girls in this situation had previously been excluded, but the Transforming Girls Education programme – initiated by the Canadian government and funded from the US$400 million G7 Charlevoix Declaration on Quality Education – had set out a plan to increase enrolment, retention and completion rates for girls across the country by 2023. Among the initiatives included in this programme, which aimed to improve opportunities for 80,000 students, was the proposed piloting of a new scholarship initiative that would support 120 young women pursuing teaching degrees.

5.3 Case study recommendations

Some key recommendations that came out of the seven case studies were as follows:

- The need to scale up social protection systems that provide relief to the poor, marginalised and vulnerable. Governments should also consider setting up wider programmes to provide a midday meal to children.

- Poor/vulnerable communities are less likely to observe the protocols of COVID-19. Government should work with the media

to persuade these communities to wear face masks, wash their hands and use hand sanitisers, and practise social distancing. Face masks and hand sanitiser should be distributed free to protect communities.

- The need for investment in digital and physical infrastructure. Rural schools, as well as inner cities and communities, must have access to ICT if they are to have equitable access to education. Internet connectivity fees must be regulated/reduced.

- While governments have initiated measures to enable continuity of education during lockdown, special efforts must be made to ensure migrant and other vulnerable children get access to remote learning. Radio and TV support programmes should be strengthened, with parents encouraged to help children stay engaged.

- The need to prioritise girls' education. In every pandemic and humanitarian crisis, girls' education is greatly affected (sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancy, child marriage, dropouts). Government and partners should educate the public on the need to ensure that girls continue to benefit from education. The public needs to understand that domestic work should be divided equally among all members of the household. As domestic violence during this period may rise, it is important to teach the public how to deal with cases of domestic violence.

- Policy-makers should invest in teacher capacity – so they are better able to use digital and information skills for teaching/learning. Teachers should also be motivated and supported to use inclusive pedagogical approaches to ensure girls and other vulnerable groups continue to benefit from education.

- Ministries of education should provide well-being, counselling and therapy support to students and teachers when the schools reopen. The focus should be on mental health, especially the challenges girls/ other vulnerable students have faced during pandemic.

- Students must get access to special training or bridging courses to recover lost school time.

- Government should provide migrant workers with a basic form of learning, so that they can at least use a mobile phone. When they have and can use mobile phones, their children will gradually learn to use them for education purposes as well. Parent literacy will also improve the educational prospects of their children. Government should consider building hostels for migrant communities.

5.4 Discussion and conclusions

The data obtained by the researchers has enabled us to draw some conclusions from those findings that may be defined as commonalities (see Table 5.2). While we must respect the limitations of these studies, which were conducted with small samples in geographically limited areas and within a short time frame, we can suggest the following:

- *The role of technology in supporting learning*

  Even in the twenty-first century, it should not be assumed that digital technology and e-learning are wholly effective ways of supporting learners who are out of school. This research demonstrated how the honest endeavours of national governments to make use of technological support during the pandemic benefited the wealthiest in society, while failing to engage with those living in the poorest communities. A lack of access to technology and equipment has placed learners from marginalised groups and communities at a severe disadvantage when compared with their wealthier peers, who enjoy much wider access.

  This situation is exacerbated for families living in rural environments, who in some instances do not have access to electricity. There was a clear urban/rural divide in those Commonwealth countries that participated in this study and this denies many children their right to education.

- *The role of parents in supporting learning*

  In many instances, students are placed at a disadvantage because of the limited education of their parents. Parental ability to support the learning of their children is dependent upon an ability to understand the education system and to have a reasonable level of literacy. Children who are first-generation learners are less likely to receive good-quality support for learning from their families during the pandemic.

- *Girls at greater risk of failure than boys*

  There remains a disparity between the expectations placed upon boys and their sisters in respect of educational outcomes. This is a common issue internationally but has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Data suggest that being out of school is likely to mean a cessation of learning for girls, who become further engaged in domestic responsibilities, placing them at risk of academic failure and reinforcing community beliefs that educating boys is more important than educating girls.

- *Lack of financial and resident security*

  Migrant workers from rural areas fear for their security and suffer both financial and social discrimination and hardships that deny them opportunities to adequately support their children's learning. Even in situations where government interventions are intended to support such families by providing food and other essentials, it is evident that this system is flawed and that families are suffering hardship. This situation has been emphasised during the COVID-19 pandemic and the education of children of migrant workers has suffered as a result.

- *Two overriding factors: 1) poverty and 2) lack of effective government planning for inclusion*

  A key factor in all the inhibitors of inclusion and equity demonstrated in the case study data is that of poverty. All the issues raised in this section of the report have a direct connection to the impoverished state in which individuals are living and attempting to obtain an education. There is no doubt that governments in the study countries have attempted to implement support mechanisms to alleviate the suffering of the populations studied. However, at the core of these studies are individuals, families and communities who were already disadvantaged and excluded from adequate resources and support prior to the pandemic. The current pandemic has exacerbated their situation and reduced the learning opportunities available to their children compared to those of wealthier families in the same country.

  The governments of every country in the case studies have made a commitment to providing education that is equitable and inclusive. They have done so by passing legislation, making policy and stating their intentions to adhere to international agreements. Beyond the policy level, there are serious omissions in planning for the implementation of inclusion, which have resulted in the further distancing of those in greatest need from their peers. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forward several key issues, as outlined in this chapter, and has confirmed the failure to address the needs of the most vulnerable members of society.

5.4.1 A further focus for research

Good practice in promoting inclusive practice exists in all the countries that have contributed to this research. This needs to be brought to the forefront of future thinking, in order that both policy-makers and professionals delivering services can become more effective in addressing the needs of

those who are marginalised in all societies. The research reported here has served well to identify issues; it is now important to build upon these small-scale studies to ensure not only better understanding, but also a reinforced commitment to practical implementation of inclusive practices.

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