BRIDGING THE WIDENING GAP IN EDUCATION BETWEEN THE POOR AND THE RICH DURING AND IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19 WITH A FOCUS ON KENYA

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INTRODUCTION

The SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) is a commitment made by all UN nation-states to create a sustainable future for all. To structure that goal, 17 SDGs were set together with a deadline to reach those goals by 2030. For many of the goals, a lot of progress has been made[1]. However, Coronavirus (COVID-19) threatens the progress of the goals substantially.

The pandemic, which started in China in December 2019 and started to have a global impact from early 2020 onwards, had a sheer impact on a lot of development projects. An example of that is the re-allocation of funds to fight the pandemic. Moreover, measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 has made the majority of ongoing development projects either difficult to complete or initiated the urge of making substantial changes to sustain

In spite of the pandemic, though, we cannot neglect the importance of pursuing the SDGs. The pandemic has a negative impact on development with risks of increasing poverty, hunger, gender inequality and lack of access to quality education for marginalized communities. Immediate efforts are done to prevent hunger and people getting sick, which focuses on short-term consequences of the pandemic. However, there are also significant long-term effects of the pandemic. For example, without any interference, there will be increased inequality, poverty and violence against girls[2]. Continuing access to quality education for everyone is one way to prevent those outcomes.

The precise effects of COVID-19 on development are not clear yet. However, it is important to have a proactive stand and assess what we can do now, to prevent the worst negative outcomes of the virus. Moreover, we are dealing with an obscure object as there is no concrete vaccine yet. So the main question is the following: How can we adjust education-based development projects so that they comply with COVID-19 measures to keep fighting for a sustainable future?

This article focuses on education development projects with a focus on SDG 4 and 10. The proposed solutions focus both on increasing quality of life during the pandemic, and after. We will use case-studies from our work to get to the root cause to clarify our arguments from Kenya and Switzerland. We have chosen those case-studies because they show different perspectives: from a developing country and a developed country.

In this article we discuss the following points:

- How has COVID interrupted the trajectory of reaching the SDG's with a focus on goal 4, quality education?

- How are the three aspects of education (access to quality education, economics, psychology) impacted by COVID-19? And what can be done to mitigate the impact?

- How can we strive to provide quality education for everyone during the pandemic? Some suggestions will be given.

HOW COVID-19 AFFECTED THE TRAJECTORY OF REACHING THE SDG-4 IN KENYA

2019 saw an increase in calls for action by various groups of individuals and organisations to work on all the SDG goals. One part of that was campaigns staged across the globe to pressure governments to take action. Icare Sustainably was involved in one of those campaigns through our Vice president Carolyne Nyarangi. A meeting was set on the 12th of February 2020 in Nairobi. Icare Sustainably and other social impact leaders and educators

came together to discuss a way forward to reach the goals, The meeting was hosted by Stephanie Mason, the Global Partnerships Manager of The Worlds Largest Lesson together with Alison Belwood, director of World's Largest Lesson [3]. The meeting aimed to deliberate how to create awareness among Kenyan children and other groups about the SDGs. A second aim was to mobilize the Kenyan SDGs Educators to lead in this awareness campaign.

It was clear from the meeting that this project was going to be a game-changer. Lots of amazing ideas and strategies were put on the table by the leaders of the various social impact organizations. This gave a clear plan on how to ensure that we bring every Kenyan onboard to achieve the global goals. Soon after the meeting, the Worlds Largest Lesson launched a new project: 'Explorers for the Global Goals' .[4]

The project focuses on teaching young children from ages 4 to 8 on key skills which are essential to create a sustainable future. Those skills are empathy, curiosity, problem-solving, creativity and effective communication. Icare Sustainably International participated as field testers of the materials of this project. We had planned another big field trip to schools to test the materials for the new project. Unfortunately in early 2020, the globe was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic which disrupted the momentum. Strict measures were put in place to prevent spread, and we have only been able to test in two settings. The trip to schools had to be cancelled to ensure safety for the learners and our team members.

Additionally, since March 12, 2020, all schools in Kenyan are closed, and they won't reopen till at least January 2021 at the earliest. We also had a series of training sessions lined up and had already launched the first SDG club in SOS schools Eldoret. This club has been a training ground for children from the age of 8 to 15 to familiarize them with the SDGs. The club had already guided them to start their own SDG projects. An example of that is planting trees in the Kenya Hill school.

We tried running the programs for the children online, but we immediately faced the challenge of how to reach the students. Not out of a lack of enthusiasm on their side, but out of a lack of means. Most of the students don't have a gadget or internet connection to enjoy online learning. Also, it has been a challenge to find an online learning program suitable for the unique circumstances of a developing country. Things such as unreliable internet and power supply, gadgets with outdated software, limited experience to work with the tools and

no purchasing power leaves few options. We had a test with Buncee, for example, and the app didn't work on most of the phones. Because of all these challenges, the projects had to be discontinued for now until a solution is found.

Sadly, this illustrates the challenges and struggles working on development projects during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many organizations have had similar experiences to us and had to cease their projects as well.

WHY ARE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS STILL IMPORTANT DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC?

Why is it important to keep development projects going? It is easy to state that there are more important things to focus on during a global pandemic. To a certain extent that is true. However, focusing on the SDGs is more important than ever during the pandemic. The pandemic threatens to have a long-term impact on the quality of life of many people. Also, there is a loss of household income, increase violence against women and a rise in mental health disorders [5]

The worst-hit people will be those who are already marginalized. That is because they don't have any backup to deal with side-effects created by COVID-19. It is not sure yet, but we can say that it is likely that communities that were struggling before the pandemic, are likely to be the most impacted during and after the pandemic as well. Also, projects aimed to help marginalized communities have decreased during the pandemic. Since most pandemic projects aim at food aid and other necessities. This means that that inequality is likely to grow.

The SDG projects are aimed at solving inequality and to make sure that everyone has the chance for a good life. Some projects are aimed at poverty, health and hunger, others at preventing gender violence, and there are those focused on solving inequality in the world. If anything, the pandemic has shown us how much inequality there still is in the world. Pursuing the SDGs can, and should, include mitigating effects of COVID-19 for those marginalized people in need.

Though there may be some cited positive effects of the novel Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the lockdown enabled families to spend more time together. Also, nature was appreciative of the drastic reduction of the levels of pollution on the beaches and oceans. Lastly, the pandemic can trigger a much-needed digital transformation to include marginalized communities in the mainstream economy [6]. Still, the negative effects will outweigh the positive ones by far.

The SDGs give us a clear map of how to fight the negative consequences of COVID-19 while making sure that other important goals are not neglected. Or as said by Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed [7]

> *"Lives and livelihoods everywhere depend on the UN's ability to support Governments in tackling this "unprecedented health, humanitarian and socio-economic crisis".*

Amina Mohammed cited the SDGs as a clear compass that gives us the direction to leave no one behind.

In the next chapter, we focus on 3 main impacts of Coronavirus on the SDGs trajectory. This with examples from our work in Kenya and an example from Switzerland.

THREE AREAS MOST AFFECTED DURING THE PANDEMIC

1. Quality education for everyone

One of the worst-hit goals was goal 4, equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The goal was to ensure an inclusive and a bright future for coming generations. This with the belief that access to quality education will lower the level of poverty, especially in the marginalized areas. Education leads to the creation of jobs and better opportunities in life.

Unfortunately, more than half of the students in Kenya are receiving little or no education at all during the pandemic [8] Probably, the situation is not different in other developing areas. Also, parents worry that by the time schools open up again too much time has passed for their children to continue their schooling. Sources indicate as well that the longer children stay out of school, the more likely it becomes that children from poor backgrounds never come back [9]. This means that for many children Covid-19 can mean the end of their educational career.

Even more so because the Kenyan government has decided that all the children will repeat their classes come 2021. Will students feel motivated to repeat a year after a year of having no schooling and structure at all? Especially because most parents lack the means or know-how to homeschool their children. This is worse among children from poor backgrounds. Especially because the government has no intention to refund school funds paid for this year.

Parents have been wondering and asking if it's possible to allow the students to sit for their exams this year if they comply with WHO guidelines. However, it is uncertain whether schools will have the capacity to handle this. What does this mean when the current school-going generation grows up with a lower level of education compared to other generations? We should keep an eye on the development effects of this because it affects poverty, hunger and potentially hampers development.

2. Economic impact

The IMF's (International Monetary Fund) projection on the global economic contraction is at 3% in 2020. These numbers are much worse than the 2008-09 financial crisis. Additionally, the economic growth by 2021 is projected to be at 5.8%, which is relatively low and shows the huge economic impact of COVID-19 on the world.

Economic decline will hit people already struggling to make a living most. Business is at an all-time low and also many people are not sure of their wages any more. In a country as Kenya, where a majority of the population depends on small businesses and day-to-day small jobs through the informal economy to make a living, the economic consequences are deadly and devastating [10]. Not only during Corona but also long after the virus fades from the concerns of public health. Businesses have been reduced to such an extent that people struggle to pay necessities such as rent, food and healthcare. When the schools open again it is unlikely all those people will be able to pay school fees and other necessities.

Also, many businesses closed, the small savings people managed to have evaporated and families are struggling to survive. In Kenya there is food assistance in some areas, but is it enough? And what will people do when the pandemic, and consequently the support, is discontinued? What will the people do who lost their means of livelihood?

The consequences of this are not visible yet. However, we can predict and prepare for this outcome. To prevent continuing struggles, awareness of the economic impacts of COVID-19 gives an opportunity to create plans to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, which will prevent personal and societal struggles. Examples of economic mitigation factors for COVID-19 are food aid, tax relief for businesses and waiving school fees in the new year. Also, post-COVID-19 funds can be handed out for people to start new businesses.

Considering education in Kenya, it is a serious question whether children can go back to school once they reopen, and not only because of school fees. Many students depend on private schools for quality education. However, according to the Kenya Private Schools Association, about 109 private schools have already permanently closed because of financial problems. And the pandemic is not yet over. The consequence of this is that already around 40.000 learners have to find a new school and close to 1500 teachers and 1100 support workers need to find another job. This will also bring extra pressure to the remaining schools.

3. Psychosocial impact

The heightened uncertainty caused by the pandemic has generated much fear due to the infectivity and fatality rate of Covid-19. The coronavirus pandemic has created epidemic hysteria and concomitant financial losses and economic burdens to Kenya. Fear is heightened because the COVID-19 is new, and there is no proven vaccine, no pharmaceutical treatment nor an end in sight when it will end. The global lockdown has caused severe panic anxiety and depression, which has fuelled a wave of domestic violence, teenage pregnancies, mental disorders and suicides in Kenya. Also, now the children are at home under stressful circumstances they are more vulnerable to abuse (2, 9).

Also, what will be the psychological effect of the lockdown on children once they go back to school? Will they be able to focus on the lessons after a year of being idle with little supervision or support? A lot of parents are too engaged with day to day uncertainties to

give their children guidance and structure during COVID-19. So most children fend for themselves with the limited means available. Again, this is worse within marginalized communities. Besides that, the struggles and uncertainties of COVID-19 add to the 'normal' struggles those communities already face related to poverty.

The last group to focus on are those students who recently finished their education. Some of them had jobs lined up, or at least reasonable expectations of employment. Now, the economy has tanked and in Kenya, all government projects are shut down. The former students are forced to sit at home idle, disappointed. If the pandemic will continue for a long time, drop-outs due to demotivation from the break will be added to these young groups sitting idle at home.

CASE STUDIES: EDUCATION PROJECTS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

In the next section, we will show these three impacts with the two case-studies. The case-studies are both projects aimed to provide education during the pandemic. They have mixed levels of success. In that way, the case-studies will give guidance on the way forward.

Case study Kenya: Nyumba Kumi

After closing the schools in Kenya, at first, distance learning was pursued through radio and television programs. However, it became clear soon after that the radio and TV are not having the expected impact. That is because a good number of kids from rural communities have no access to the content. Therefore, a new project was proposed by the Kenyan Ministry of Education together with the Teachers Service Commission and the Cabinet Secretary for Education. It was to be a community learning program based on the Nyumba Kumi initiative.

Nyumba Kumi originated as a community policing program. Every 10 households are allocated an elder who reports to the chief and oversees and ensures safety and sustainability in the neighbourhoods. This program was launched in 2013 by the president of Kenya.

The Nyumba Kumi community-based learning initiative aims to connect the Nyumba Kumi elders with teachers and chiefs to offer free learning on a 10-households level. This teacher will assist with learning while the schools are closed. 10 households are limited enough to comply with coronavirus regulations and keep the risk of spread to a minimum. In that way, this program may be the solution to the inequality brought about by the pandemic.

The success of this project would mitigate the negative impact on access to quality education. Also, it can bring psychological relief because the children have something to occupy themselves with and feel supported during these tough times.

However, implementation is a big challenge. For one, there has to be a way to ensure the teachers continuing dedication to the project. For this, financial compensation is needed, both for resources needed and to assist the teachers in their work. Also, the Kenyan government aims to roll out the initiative on a nation-wide scale. This requires huge planning and one can wonder if it's not easier to roll it out on a smaller local scale. Also, serious monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the education, and financial management, is vital for the success of this plan.

For now, the project has not started yet. It is yet to be determined how successful Nyumba Kumi will be, however, Kenyans are doubtful whether it will take off.

Case study Switzerland: How is quality education affected in a developed country?

An example of how local schools handled a frightening new situation where it needed support from all the stakeholders.

In Switzerland, parents had to adapt to working from home 100% of the time. While working at home, they also had to take on 24/7 child care and homeschooling. The teachers needed to create new material and an agenda for the students to follow from home to not compromise the curriculum. This meant that students had to develop new skills and a new learning system and find alternatives to socializing with other fellows. All this while parents and children had limited time to support each other.

A solution was proposed by the local schools. Each teacher will drop off homework each Monday morning at the students' houses (alternatively parents were collecting by appointment at the school). Then each Friday the materials were returned to the teachers for review. The situation was a big challenge for everyone. But with everyone's collaboration, it was successful.

This project's main aim was to ensure that COVID-19 restrictions would not interfere with education. In that way, the project has been successful. Also, the project had some positive psychological impacts as parents felt less pressure to provide homeschooling materials while also working.

When Corona cases started to decrease in Switzerland, schools were reopened with the new school year in 2020/2021. The government imposed some adjustments, keep social distance, regular handwashing, no sharing of school materials or food, only play with kids from your year and stay home with any signs of sickness. In a few weeks, it will become clear if these measures were sufficient to start normal life without increased infection rates.

Takeaways from the case studies

Success of the measures taken during the pandemic depend on either strict government control or strict adherence to regulations by the population themselves.

However, it is not clear yet what is the right way forward, because this situation is completely unprecedented.

It is clear, however, that the contribution of volunteers and workers need to be recognized because of the risks of getting sick they endure.

It is therefore shown in the case-studies that proper planning and care is needed. This to make sure that the health of the students, the workers, and the marginalized communities themselves is guaranteed before schools resume.

CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN BE DONE TO MITIGATE THE EDUCATION GAP CREATED DURING COVID-19?

How can we support sustainable development without compromising the health of the population?

This is the question every social impact organization has been asking. Most of these organizations have adapted to the situation in different ways. The two case studies have shown that these

adjustments come with difficulties. We do know, however, that any success will come from critically analysing the 'new normal' and by knowing where the impact will be felt most. This article has contributed to that awareness.

Also, any solution will require a multi-sectoral approach and global partnerships to make sure resources are allocated fairly and information about what works is shared. We want to end this article with some suggestions for projects and approaches that might be of help.

1. Approach: Digital transformation

This is more an approach than a defined project. In our experience, projects to bridge inequality fail because of lack of access to either physical technologies (gadgets) or networks (internet, phone, access to aid etc.) in marginalized areas. This is the case in both urban and rural areas, but more so in the latter.

Digital transformation of those areas is key to create global connectivity to ensure everyone has access to the same resources. Access to those resources means opportunities. Corona has seen us all locked up indoors. This has made it clearer than ever what inequality of access to resources means. Let's use this time to drive digital transformation.

To achieve this, there should be a proper analysis and audit of global connectivity and infrastructure. Also, proper mapping of areas with the biggest challenges. Based on the outcome of the audit a plan can be drafted which all stakeholders can use. By working together we can achieve digital transformation for the marginalized communities [11].

Successful digital transformation requires partnerships with a broad range of actors. Examples of those are ecosystem partners, such as start-ups and organizations from different industries.

2. Project: Distribution of physical lesson material to learners in their local language.

In addition to digital transformation, the education gap can be closed with physical learning materials. This should be combined with food donations that are already happening to limit contact and resource use. To make this a success, teachers can join the food drives to explain the learning materials.

Most learning materials which can be found online are not in the local language. However, many parents and students are most comfortable with their own language. Translations make the materials more accessible for students and their caretakers alike so the students can receive guidance.

3. Monetary Support

Communities need monetary support, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as both cater to different needs.

Monetary support during Corona is to assist households which have lost their incomes. This is so they can buy food and pay rent and other necessities. This support comes in 2 shapes: unconditional funds and money for wages.

Mostly, unconditional funds are given to low-income households which lost their income in urban slums (10, 12). The 'Money for Wages' strategy is used for educated people or youth. For example, youth work in government projects for a wage called the Kazi Mtaani Programme in Kenya [13] However, there is controversy about payments of the program and strong competition to get in the program[14]. This shows a need for more of these projects which are run with strict financial control.

Post-Corona monetary support should be done by waiving school fees, or by assisting families to pay school expenses or school fees. This will ensure more children go back to school. Also, supporting private schools with a good reputation to re-open. This to ensure quality education is available once the schools reopen.

Closing remarks

For the world to overcome COVID-19 and all its consequences, it has to be clear to everyone that Corona has not only an impact on global health.

As a global community, we also need to focus on other outcomes with long-term consequences, such as economic, education and psychological impact. Those impacts will be limited with strong multilateral cooperation and projects to curb the effects of the pandemic. This article is the first step of Icare Sustainably's contribution to create awareness of those consequences and to work towards solutions.

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