

Literature Review

Education Sector COVID-19 Response Plan and Its Implication on Inclusive Education in the Gambia

Abdou Barrow

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, Indonesia, abdoubarrow99@gmail.com

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Abstract

In the early hours of 2020, COVID -19 terrorized the world by forcing many countries to close their borders and restricted internal movements, which resulted in imposing a state of national emergency that led to lockdowns for months in some areas for years. The Gambia was not an exception to this trajectory, as it affects almost all sectors, including education. As a result, "the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE)" designed a Response framework to curb learning loss across the country. This study aimed to analyze the policy and describe the implications it has on inclusive education. The qualitative research method was used, imploring the interpretive approach in the analysis. Despite the policy's nobility and ambitiousness, the findings from the analysis revealed that the policy had a serious blind spot in the area of inclusion which resulted in many children being left out, either their inability to access the mediums where lessons are delivered or other social factors. Many households in the rural Gambia did not have a stable electricity supply nor owned a television or radio set. Therefore, children in these communities were not able to benefit from this program. In addition, children with special needs are also excluded, particularly those who visual or hearing impairment.

Keywords

Inclusion; inclusive education; covid-19; the Gambia; response plan; education

Introduction

Two years ago, the world was at a stand stilled, and everything about it was unstable. A potential threat faced the global market; a monster was touring the globe from country to country without reservation. This has posed a universal health disaster in the hand of COVID-19. The global pandemic triggered a crisis in humanity that has affected the whole world, mostly those living in "lower socioeconomic backgrounds" (Gates, 2020; Wannamakok et al., 2020). According to BBC, as of July 2020, the universal health crisis posed by pandemics "has spread to over 16 million cases, reaching almost 200 countries and affecting over half a million deaths" (BBC, 2020; Gupta. SD, 2020; Wannamakok et al., 2020).



During these periods, COVID-19 forced countries to close their borders, which seriously harmed global economies. In addition, the pandemic has triggered a predicament of social injustice and inequality, mainly affecting vulnerable and marginalized communities (Wannamakok et al., 2020). The challenges COVID poses to the world are not limited to one sphere but rather in a broader spectrum, including education. It has prompted a shift in education all over the world. This paradigm shift has left a serious vacuum in global education and resulted in the adaptation of distance learning through social media or other virtual mediums.

Moving from the global context, it should not be a surprise if it is said that COVID has traumatized one of the tiniest nations in mainland Africa (the Gambia). The increased number of COVID cases in the country and neighbouring Senegal forced the president to declare a state of emergency and nationwide lockdown under the guidance of the ministry of health. Foroya Newspaper (2020) stated that "On the 17th of March 2020, His Excellency the President of the Republic of the Gambia addressed the nation on the status of the Corona Virus; subsequently, he declared all schools and educational institutions closed as a measure to protect children, teachers and education support personnel to control the spread of the virus" (Corr, 2020, p. 2).

In response to this situation, the "Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education" (MoBSE) developed a response plan in order to reduce learning loss in the country. References to the Minimum Standard of MoBSE, schools must attain 880 contact hours at least in an academic year (MOBSE, 2004, p. 38, 2016b). Therefore, this lockdown would have deterred schools from attaining this goal. Thus, the ministry deemed it necessary to do something to reduce learning loss. Consequently, the new distance learning policy introduced by MoBSE through Television, Radio, and other social media platforms has triggered many concerns and questions about how well it will work. How inclusive is the policy? Because schools have special needs children who might be visually impaired or hearing impaired, was their plight considered? In fact, in case they did not have those conditions, how about children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, and other learning difficulties? Another concern raised is an unequal distribution of electricity across the country and access to internet facilities, radio, and television in some remote areas in the country. If these facilities are not available, how would children in these areas have access to online lessons? Due to the lack of official statistics on the exact number of children who benefit from this program, it is hard to say the exact figure. Unfortunately, data management is one of the challenges faced by the ministry because most of the transactions are still manual instead of digitalized, which is equally hard to access by the public. Notwithstanding, according to UNICEF 2020, about 64% of children living in rural areas did not benefit from this distance learning due to the above constraints.

UNICEF's, (2020) indicated that "More than 700,000 children and adolescents experienced learning loss for seven months in The Gambia. Equally, a survey on this policy showed that only 46% and 36% of urban and rural households, respectively, had a learner actively engaged in an educational activity during the pandemic" (UNICEF, 2020a). This indicates that the majority of school-going children were not benefiting from these online lessons, especially those in rural areas. Consequently, learning loss was pervasive in rural Gambia despite efforts made by the government through MOBSE by introducing distance learning using Radio and Television as a medium of instruction (UNICEF, 2020a).



Brief Background about the Gambia

"Gambia is said to be one of the smallest countries in West Africa, with a population of about 1.8 million people" (GBOS, 2013). It is almost surrounded by Senegal, which is the only country it shares borders with. According to USAID, "the Gambia is one of the most compactly populated nations in West Africa. Where the highest concentration of people is around the urban areas, a landscape that spread from the capital Banjul" (USAID, 2020). Economic-wise, agriculture is the most dominant practice in the country, where the majority of the people are engaged in animal rearing and the production of crops. Farmers usually grow rice, cassava, maize, millet, and sorghum. Only a small fraction of the population is processing raw materials into fine goods, including "processing peanuts, fish, and hides" (Jallow, 2020; USAID, 2020). The Gambia is identified as one of the least developed countries in mainland Africa" (Jallow, 2020). Corr (2020) argued that the Minimum wage in the Gambia is 50 dalasi per day, equivalent to (\$1.25). The poverty rate remains at 48.6%. Thus, poverty is even more pervasive in rural areas and accounts for about 70% of the total poor in the Country (Corr, 2020).

The Point newspaper article dated the 26th of April 2019 stated that:

"In today's Gambia, the average salary is D3000 which is equivalent to (\$60) whilst a bag of rice costs an exorbitant price between D1, 550 (US\$30). While Internet tariffs are skyrocketing, Megabytes and normal calls D3000 Monthly".

Expounding on Corr's Work 2020, it goes without aphorism that most parents, including teachers, cannot afford Laptops, Computers, or even Smartphones, much more megabytes. If that is so, how do they have access to the internet? Some parents in rural areas potentially never heard of Google, much more using it. In addition, the most devastating thing is the power supply; most parts of the rural area are still without electricity. Thus, having a reliable power supply is still a major impediment (Corr, 2020).

This analysis is focused on the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education's Covid-19 response policy. Thus, I provide basic statistics on schools, students, and teachers under the said ministry across the country. This data is not segregated into several special needs students and regular students; it was presented in an inclusive nature. The data of the said categories are as follows:

Early Childhood Development (ECD) has 1,460 centres with a student population of 126 573 for both sexes. As for the category of teachers, they have 4 046 ECD teachers across. For the Lower Basic Category, the data is as follows; schools 1, 229, students 401, 333, while teachers are 12, 116. In the Upper Basic Category, the ministry records 524 UBS with a student population of 119 405 and a teacher population of 6 083. The last category of the school system under MoBSE is Senior Secondary which constitutes 213 schools with a student and teacher population of 76, 537, and 3, 326 respectively (MOBSE, 2021, p. 50, 156, 280, 396).

Covid-19 Response Framework

As the pandemic rudely interrupted economic, political, religious, social, and, more importantly, educational processes across the globe. The learning journey of about 1.6 billion students in over 150 countries is disrupted. In reaction to that, many nations employed some form of distance learning approaches such as Television broadcasting, Radio, WhatsApp platforms, Google classroom, Zoom



Meetings, and other social media outlets (World Bank, 2022). Gambia used two main mediums in disseminating virtual lessons to children across the country, which are TV and Radio (UNICEF, 2020b). The magnitude of the covid pandemic is not just a matter of Public Health; rather, it did influence our social, political, religious, and economic life as well. Therefore, "an effective public health reaction forces such as support from all the sectors in the Gambia and the general public at large was needed" (Jallow, 2020; MOBSE, 2020).

Consequently, the closure of schools was among the government's extensions of "non-pharmaceutical interventions" of Physical distancing, which resulted in the prohibition of large assemblies. The restriction took toll on education in all categories ranging from Basic, Secondary, and Tertiary education institutions. It is important to note that this does not only affects the conventional schools; rather, other learning establishments like *Majlis* (traditional Islamic Education Institutions) are also affected (MOBSE, 2020). With this dilemma, the Permanent Secretary of MoBSE established a multidisciplinary technical committee, which he chaired to oversee the "Education Sector Response Policy to the COVID-19 Pandemic". While referring to the policy framework, the committee was tasked to produce and support the facilitation of comprehensible, actual, and impartial "educational responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic" (MOBSE, 2016a, 2020).

Among the strategies, MOBSE designed three scenarios in case the situation gets worse or better, what ought to happen?

"Scenarios 1: This is the unlike situation where the infection rate is so low, and risk is well mitigated for schools to reopen after the first 21 days. During this period, a distance education program through radio and TV will be started to keep children busy at home and save them from infection. **Scenarios 2:** This is based on the likelihood that the risk of COVID-19 will be moderate to high, resulting in schools being closed for up to 3 months or more. During this period, radio and TV distance learning will be scaled-up, consideration will be made to deliver printed curriculum materials to children, and alternative curriculum delivery platforms will be searched and used. **Scenarios 3:** When the country fully recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic and schools are fully operational. This phase will be used to fix broken systems, build new ones and ensure that the resilience of the education sector is at a level ready to support the delivery of the curriculum in full either through face-to-face in classrooms or distance learning means"(MOBSE, 2020, p. 2).

Looking at the policy framework, it is curial to elaborate on the scenarios set to address learning loss. As per the first declaration of the state of emergency by the president, which resulted in a national lockdown, MoBSE hopes if the situation is better within the first 21 days declared by the president, schools will reopen, and business will continue as usual. However, during the first 21-days, they decided to engage students through distance learning by using the Gambia Radio and Television services and other private TV and Radio stations within the country. During this first phase of lockdowns, learning was limited to the said mediums. As the covid situation persists, the second scenario should have come to play, but the lesson delivery mode was more or less the same. The plan of scaling up the learning method was never implemented or, if done, had affected a very small portion of the population. Delivering printed curriculum materials to children did not reach every part of the country; if anything, the segregation remains apparent. After seven months of school closure, the country finally reopens schools, and lessons are expected to be normal. However, so much was lost, and very little infrastructure was in place to ensure schools recovered. Thus, schools are forced to



alternate and stretch from Monday to Saturday, which also undermines the quality of education as well as equal access to education (MOBSE, 2021).

The overarching objective of this Education Sector COVID-19 Response Plan is to ensure that no child is left behind. It is understood that all the curriculum delivery modes (e.g., radio home-based based study, online learning, etc.) during the school closure period may not work for every child, but a conscious effort will be made to ensure that children at risk of being left behind (e.g., children with disabilities, with no access to internet and TV; with the poor radio signal, etc.) are served appropriately" (MOBSE, 2020, p. 3).

To expound on the above-mentioned objectives or guiding principles, it is clear that the ministry seems to have thought of the diversity of the student population across the country; as such, the policy hopes to include all children. In doing so, MoBSE hopes to ensure that children and their parents or families are safe, knowing that everything will depend on good health. And, they should have access to reliable information at the right moment as well as protect children from COVID. The protection part appeared to be successful because schools were closed and children were restricted in their homes which helped mitigate the spread of the virus. However, access to information remains questionable because many parts of the country do not have access to TV or Radio, which are used as a primary medium of spreading information.

Inclusive Education

Many nations have prided themselves on the notion of inclusivity in their national programs. The Gambia is not an exception. The Gambia government through MoBSE designed a specific policy that endeavours to include everyone and gives them equal opportunity in national affairs, particularly in education. "MoBSE's inclusive policy framework defines inclusion 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 that covers all children of appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children" (MOBSE, 2015).

ACC library services quoted Richter 2014 who argued that "inclusion refers to how diversity is leveraged to create a fair, equitable, healthy, and high-performing organization or community where all individuals are respected, feel engaged and motivated, and their contributions toward meeting organizational and societal goals are valued" (ACC Library Services, n.d. para. 1).

"Inclusive education or inclusive learning is described as the inclusion and teaching of all children in formal or non-formal learning environments without regard to gender, physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, cultural, religious, or other characteristics" (MOBSE, 2015). The *Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 2.1*: "States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights outlined in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective to the child's physical, or other states as well as his/her parents' economic or social status" (United Nations, 1989).

"The Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Gambia makes endowment, in Section 30, for the right to education of all persons: All persons shall have the right to equal educational



opportunities and facilities to achieve the full realization of that right" (MOBSE, 2015; The Constitution of the Gambia, 1997).

Inclusion in education is the main desire of the government of the Gambia through the "Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education" (MoBSE). Thus, the ministry championed a framework that adhered to inclusive nature in education which is not limited to need-based but has gone beyond to consider the geographical, economic, and cultural diversity across the country. References to MoBSE's inclusive framework, teaching, and learning in any form within the country should ensure to include every child in the country irrespective of their physical, social, cognitive, financial, religious, political, and, most importantly, geographical conditions.

In the spirit of inclusive education, the ministry's policy of distance learning should use that framework as a yardstick to measure how inclusive the initiative should be due to the diverse nature of the county in all aspects. In value, the COVID-19 policy framework appeared to adhere to inclusive education; however, discrepancies are realized between the policy and practice as the policy included distance learning through television and radio platforms. This medium is not accessible to every community, particularly in the rural Gambia, which shall be discussed later. I, therefore, used an inclusive framework to measure the success of this policy in providing constitutionally guaranteed rights to every child in the country. Since MoBSE (2016a) education sector policy "is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal 4, focusing on accessible, equitable, and inclusive quality education for all" (MoBSE, 2016a). The state should ensure that any policy it design adheres to Inclusion and accessibility.

Summing up, it is evident that numerous pieces of literature discussed the topic of distance learning. What sets this current work apart from the literature is the geographical context of the study, and the issue of the inclusive nature of distance learning focusing on TV and Radio as a medium of instruction. The paper is designed to analyze the education sector's COVID-19 response framework and understand its implication for inclusive education. Owing to the social and economic context of the Gambia, too many children are left behind in the new framework that was designed to reduce learning loss across the country, but it appears that the majority of students who did benefit from this online learning are children from urban areas or those from elite families. At the same time, leaving out a good number of students who are living in the rural Gambia (Corr, 2020). The researcher problematizes the exclusive nature of the policy towards children who are physically, emotionally, and cognitively challenged, as well as those from disadvantaged geographical locations in The Gambia and economically challenged.

Method

To understand and analyze the implication of the Education sector COVID-19 response plan on inclusive education in the Gambian context. The researcher uses a qualitative research approach banking on the interpretive model of research. The author uses this model because he starts his study with data and will try to derive a theory about the COVID-19 Response Framework from the observed data (OER, n.d.). Purposive sampling procedures were used during participant selection for the interviews. The researcher used this approach since he has specific requirements to determine the qualification of participants to be selected for the study. To be selected as participants you should be



either a teacher, parent, cluster monitor, or education officer at the regional and national levels. These categories are tenaciously identified by the researcher. The researcher chose this grounded on his justification as to who will be more informative (Tenny et al., 2021).

The study relies on interviews, national and international resources related to distance learning and inclusive education during the COVID period, and Parents, teachers, and students' reactions on social media, e.g., Facebook. Interviews are conducted through WhatsApp calls, voice messaging, text messaging, and google Forms, where participants respond to interview questions in writing. The interview includes one senior education officer, three Education officers, two cluster monitors, five teachers, and seven parents, three women and four men; these equals 18 participants. Interviews were conducted in June 2022. And thirteen of the research participants are living in the rural Gambia, while five are residing in the urban Gambia.

A telephone interview is not preferred by many traditional researchers; however, it appeared to be the best option for this study due to my geographical location and constraint on travelling to The Gambia to conduct face-to-face interviews. Nevertheless, "telephone interview might be considered unusual, but it is becoming common in social science research as it is less time consuming and cost-effective" (Farooq, 2015). Thematic analysis is used in this study. The researcher used Miles and Huberman's three-step analysis, which are data reduction, data display, and drawing a conclusion. The process of data collection and analysis was simultaneously done.

Results

The findings of the study are presented in themes which are drawn from the empirical data gathered from interviews and national and international reports on the policy. Existing secondary data relevant to this work are also used during analysis and are discussed below. The covid-19 response plan was the only instrument implored by the Gambia's ministry of basic education to ensure that teaching and learning continue. The intention of the instrument is commendable as the situation forced teachers, parents, students and other relevant stakeholders to stay in their homes. Therefore, devising a mechanism that strives to ensure children have access to education is the right move. However, the study reveals some interesting information about the policy which is discussed below.

The Gambia "Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education's policy initiative has triggered mixed feelings amongst Gambians. Complaints and worries came from all works of life in response to the visibility of the policy. The National Assembly of the country had raised questions as to how MoBSE's online learning might deprive many students, particularly those in the remote areas of the country where access to network coverage for both television and radios and other social media might be a challenge, coupled with poor networking services compare to the urban areas (Corr, 2020; UNICEF, 2020a, 2020b).

Complementary Efforts of Citizens and NGOs

An online media journalist from the Gambia Talent Promotion, an online Radio and TV station, quoted a member of the National assembly whose identity was withheld after their interaction on the subject at a private meeting, and this is what the member had to say:



"In one of our meetings, a member of the committee from the furthest region mentioned that he bought a 'solar radio' and that is what his children and other students in the community are using to follow the online lessons; he told us they always invade my house to listen.' After the meeting, we discussed and agreed that it would be a good idea to do something like this. First, we informed the Ministry of Education, but unfortunately, they could not provide support because they had other issues to deal with like paying the radio stations for the coverage amongst a host of other things".

Knowing that MOBSE could not do anything at the time, he decided to contact a few of their development partners for support to at least better the situation of those children, and the Steve Sinnott Foundation responded positively. The Steve Sinnott Foundation's response had helped to boost 3800 children's access to radio to continue their learning. Without doubts, some citizens have recognised that government cannot do it alone and this type of initiative is welcome in times like that to support government policies. However, securing 380 radio sets which are distributed within three regions, did not curb the inequality that the policy was blindsided with. According to Ebrima on his Facebook live video in 2020 entitled concerned parent majority of children are not accessing distance learning despite some intervention from some NGOs and other private citizens. He argued that the efforts were made in recognition of the flaws in the policy. As mentioned earlier, the idea should have been to involve all the children in the program irrespective of their socioeconomic, geographical, physical, cognitive, or emotional well-being (Corr, 2020).

Similar efforts were made by individual citizens and other NGOs. For example, social workers across the country have reacted to the situation posed by COVID-19 by agitating for vital facilities and education (IFSW, 2020). Civil service organizations also embarked on the sensitization campaign, which was mainly geared towards the dangers of COVID, ensuring that people are aware through WhatsApp and Facebook platforms. There is a belief among the citizenry that the little success the policy had registered was complemented by the efforts of individual citizens.

One of the participants stated that he took it upon himself to ensure that children within his community were gathered in different locations during lessons to follow the classes, and he made it his responsibility to monitor them. For him, someone had to step up for the children who could not afford to access these lessons without any form of support. And, it appeared that for most of them in remote areas, their parents are less likely to pressure or ensure that their children follow the distance learning on television or radios (Interview June 7th 2022).

Inclusion Vs. Exclusion: Lack of Necessary Infrastructure and Economic Factors

By design, the policy has attained inclusivity because the objective of the "plan is to ensure that no child is left behind" (MOBSE, 2020). Now the question at hand would be, was that the case? The answer you get from most people in rural Gambia is no. The source of the above claim is from the Interviews and Social media discussions on the policy like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Most participants in the rural Gambia, particularly parents who claimed that their children were left out of distance learning because the ministry failed to use a mechanism that would include all children. A cluster monitor in region five (5) in the central river region of The Gambia said that many households in his cluster did not have access to electricity, more so a television; hence children living in those households were left out, which contradicts the policy desire of no child left behind. According to him,



most of these people felt that the policy was designed for children residing in metropolitan areas and some major towns in the countryside; rather, it deprived children in the remote areas of the country. U-Report, a survey conducted in 2020 stated that "almost 700,000 children and adolescents in the schools experienced learning loss for seven months, it also showed that only 46% and 36% of urban and rural households had a learner actively engaged in an educational activity during the pandemic (Corr, 2020; Dreesen et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020a). This means that the government's effort through MoBSE which resorted to distance learning through radio and television did not serve a majority of Gambian children.

Expounding on the report and the issue of inclusion, it would be crucial to look at the economic, technological, and electricity supply across the country. According to the website of the National Water and Electricity Company (NAWEC), urban areas have about 80% access to electricity while rural areas are still under 50%. Naturally, this should not be a surprise because it appeared to be the case in many parts of Africa. Knowing that most of the gadgets used in delivering lessons use electricity, and most communities in the rural Gambia still lack stable or access to electricity supply, how would they have access to television or radios? It is not lost on me that some radios might use solar power or battery, which would lead me to the economic situation of an average Gambian. According to Jallow, (2020) majority of rural households are living on a daily wage of USD1.2, how do you expect such households to buy solar power radio or television?

An inquiry by UNICEF in 2020 has supported the argument of unequal access to electricity. The study compared different countries across the world, including the Gambia, and it shows that a vast disproportion "exist between the richest and the poorest households" in children's access to online learning. Equally, it stressed that "Almost all technologies used to deliver education while schools remain closed require electricity. And in seven countries which are Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Sudan, Lesotho, and Kiribati, less than 10 per cent of the poorest households have access to electricity" (United Nations, 2020). This is a clear indication that the country is not yet ready for online learning.

The Gambia is classified "as one of the poorest and the least developed countries in mainland Africa" and it is among the countries which are low-income nations. The Minimum wage in the Gambia is 50 dalasi per day which, is equivalent to (USD1.25) as mentioned above and its poverty rate remains at 48.6%. In rural areas, poverty is even more pervasive and almost accounts for about 70% of the total poor in the country. This is so because people in the countryside have inadequate access to service and communal transportation, and more importantly, it has very poor infrastructural facilities. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, "estimated that about 74% of the rural Gambian population lives on less than USD\$1.25 a day in comparison to 32.7% of their urban counterparts" (Jallow, 2020). Access to equitable and quality education is a constitutional right guaranteed by the supreme laws of the land. Therefore, if a state is to beseech any alternative approach that is geared towards providing education to children of the Gambia, it should serve all irrespective of their economic or any other state. Hence, no child should be left behind as aspired by this policy and the inclusive education framework of MoBSE. It appears that the ministry of education has lost sight of the inclusive framework that recognizes all children. The education sector in the Gambia was rigorously stroked by the pandemic due to the delicate "political and economic situation of the country" (Wannamakok et al.,



2020). As a consequence of the lockdowns and school closures, potential violations were posed to children as they stayed home from school. Staying home should not have been an issue if they were benefiting from the introduced policy. However, access to radio and television services was a challenge for underprivileged groups such as special needs students and girls. Girls, in particular, formed a category of students whose domestic chores discouraged them from following the lessons on TV and Radio. Yet still, "children from poor households and rural communities without reliable sources of electricity face barriers to access" (Jallow, 2020; Wannamakok et al., 2020).

Several interviews were conducted with stakeholders in school management, teachers, and parents about their views on the Education Sector COVID-19 Response Plan, which introduced distance learning through television and radio. Divergent views were expressed about the policy, its inclusive or exclusive nature, as well as feasibility of the policy; some of those views are discussed below.

This issue of domestic chores putting girls at potential risk of leaving out was supported by some participants, while others disagreed. However, indeed, many parents in rural and some parts of the urban Gambia are not schooled and know very little about education. Seeing their children in the living room watching television would be considered a waste of time; instead, they will be asked to do their domestic chores. This is what a participant has to say:

Researcher: Many parents in rural communities are not schooled; thus, they would not allow their children to be sitting watching TV or listening to the radio if they could do certain domestic chores, especially for girls. Do you agree/disagree with this statement? And why?

Participant: I strongly agree with this statement simply because it is a social contract in the Gambian society that girls should be the ones doing home chores.

A similar argument was made by Jallow (2020), stating that women and girls are mostly overlooked owing to the patriarchal nature of the Gambian society. She stated that the school closure "was part of the Gambia government's effort to curb the spread of the virus" (Jallow, 2020). Consequently, "mothers and daughters are left to care for the children because that is a task that is dedicated to women, and it impacts their productivity and work. Accordingly, girls devote little time following remote learning platforms organized by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) in the interest of reducing learning loss among school children" (Jallow, 2020).

The majority of participants believed that the policy was not special needs friendly thus, they believed it is more of an exclusive-oriented policy rather than inclusive. This is what some of the participants have to say:

Researcher: Would you say this COVID response plan is inclusive-oriented or exclusive-oriented? And why?

Participant A: It is exclusive-oriented because children of the poor farmers in the villages are at a disadvantage. They don't have access to either TV and Radio or internet facilities. Therefore, they were not considered when this policy was designed.

Participant B: The Plan was exclusive because children from a poor economic background with physical and psychological challenges were left out of the plan.

The views above are shared by many of the participants ranging from teachers, some education officers, cluster monitors, and parents who believed that the policy has a blind spot for inclusion, because the implementation did not include all the children. To justify their view, many cited special



needs children as an example who were believed to be excluded. This is the view of a cluster monitor in the rural Gambia: the policy is not inclusive because there is a huge margin between the children in rural and urban schools. Equally, it is not the best practice for children with special needs, especially those who are visually and hearing impaired.

Another interesting response was given by a participant who argued that MOBSE was responsible for both conventional and some madrassa schools in the country, but to his surprise, the policy did not accommodate any formal madrassa curriculum during this online lesson delivery. As a result, his children, who are going to a madrassa, did not have access to education for almost seven months. For him, the policy was biased against madrassa schools because they were neglected and disregarded. He further makes a very strong statement that is not limited to this policy. According to him, madrasa education is not valued by the state because many government initiatives toward education always neglect and discriminate against madrasa students. It is unfortunate, but this will continue whether with this policy or not. This is why when they introduced the television and radio lesson, I wasn't surprised to see only secular lessons delivered and Islamic curriculum in the secular schools occasionally.

Inadequate Sensitisation Vs Helplessness

Another challenge the policy faced was the fact that many parents were not aware of the program; even if they had heard of the program, they never knew the lesson schedules on the TV and radios, which suggested a lack of proper coordination and orientation with the public on the implementation of the policy. A parent stated in a Facebook interview through an online radio journalist that his children were not following the program because he did not know about the policy; he knew it through his friend, who equally did not know the timing properly. I, therefore, searched the program through channels, but I never found it; thus, I lost hope in any determination to force or facilitate for my children to follow the lesson. He posed the question to the journalist how do they expect my children to follow this program if I don't know the when and how? This suggests poor sensitisation or orientation before the implementation of the program.

The above statement appeared to be a common view amongst parents that the program was not well coordinated because many people in rural areas are not aware of the program, or did not have access to television, radio, electricity supply, and internet facilities. Some stated that MOBSE was fully aware of all those challenges but still desired to use that medium as an alternative approach to curb learning loss because they felt helpless and they can't afford to be seen doing nothing. This perspective of parents and other stakeholders was confirmed by the statement of the Minister of Education, which stated that they are aware that the policy was not to attain 100% inclusion but at least to reduce learning loss. Owing to the policy framework, the policy appeared to be developed without proper preparation and hoped to be improved along the line, but much has not changed throughout the implementation of distance learning through TVs and Radios.

Looking at the situation at hand, it appeared that MoBSE had no other choices; the only option available for them was distance learning which was not a bad idea. However, I hold the view that MOBSE could have done better than that, owing to the fact many children were excluded from the program, and the fund allocated could be better used, this point will be buttressed shortly in the next section. Unfortunately, the Gambia in any sector is mostly reactive to issues rather than proactive. It is



not lost on me that COVID has caught many nations unprepared, but the magnitude of the impact was different because they started digitizing their education system earlier. Thus, with the presence of the pandemic, they had to adjust in a few areas but in the case of Gambia's education system is seriously under-equipped with technological tools, and the teaching staff on how to utilise the tools where available.

Potential Alternatives to Remedy the Situation

The researcher holds the view that the ministry should have refocused the energy and resources on transforming the system rather than parading themselves with the trend on the global stage. Many countries were using television, radio, and other social media outlets because they had the capacity, but the Gambia did not at the time. However, MOBSE felt obligated to do something rather than look helpless while the rest of the world was going ahead.

The budget allocated for MOBSE to address the social and other impacts of COVID-19 and any other possible emergency could be used wisely by the department instead of spending about 4 million US dollars on a program that does not cover even half of its student population. Alternatively, these funds should be invested in educational infrastructure by upgrading and providing technological facilities such as tablets, computers, and reliable internet facilities, as well as sustainable energy that can support educational continuity, especially in underprivileged and hard-to-reach communities. Similar arguments were made by Wannamakok et al., (2020) in their work entitled *Human rights and education for Gambian young women during COVID-19: Recommendations for social policy and practice*. If that fund was used on upgrading the educational infrastructure and train teachers on how to utilize them, will not only enhance children's education during the period of the COVID era but could help the system to persevere if any pandemic or natural or artificial disaster is to hit the world again in the future.

Conclusion

Analysis of the *education sector COVID-19 plan* indicated that the policy has an ambitious desire to provide alternative learning options to children in the Gambia to reduce learning loss. The policy objective highlighted that no child to be left behind. This initiative is noble, and it is in conjunction with the "Education Sector Policy 2016- 2030 and the Inclusive Education framework" (MOBSE, 2015, 2016b). It cannot go without commending MoBSE for at least trying to do something at the time. The fact remains that the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education had overlooked the fact that communities in the rural and the urban Gambia have different opportunities and access to national cake. Ranging from economic and other infrastructural development such as telecommunication, electricity, and internet access. Thus, making that bold statement of no child left behind appeared to be a cover-up while polishing the defects of the policy instead of accepting the fact that MOBSE was not ready at the time to provide any practical and ideal solution or alternative to our children's learning lost which would cover about 80 - 95% of the student population across the country. The study found that the policy had a serious blind spot in the area of inclusion because many children are left out due to the inability to access the mediums where lessons are delivered. Many households in the rural Gambia did not have a stable electricity supply or even own a television or radio set therefore, children in these communities couldn't benefit from the program. In addition, children with special needs are also excluded, particularly does who are visually or hearing impaired. Notwithstanding, the researcher recommends further study to be done to analyse the policy critically, more diversely and rigorously. The author suggests different data collection approaches as those used in this study are not sufficient



enough. The study used telephone interviews and questions on google Forms to collect data which limits the findings of the study. due to the geographical location of the researcher during the study, he was not able to conduct face-to-face interviews to gather more data from participants. Also, he was not able to directly access the record office at the ministry of education department in Banjul for further information on the policy framework, which resulted in limiting the findings as suggested above. Though some relevant authorities were interviewed via telephone, it was a challenge to obtain all the necessary information needed due to time and connection constraints.

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