

Education under COVID-19: Initial Responses in Asia and Africa

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This special issue compiles reports on the current status of education in eight countries in Africa and Asia during the COVID-19 emergency. Since the outbreak of the pandemic at the end of 2019, the education sector, along with other sectors, has undergone a severe crisis around the world, especially in the Global South. The number of infected people in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) has exceeded 140 million, the number of deaths has exceeded 3 million, and 131 out of 137 LMICs closed their schools at some point (UNESCO, 2021; Worldometer, 2021). In addition, the pandemic has made international travel virtually impossible; scholars have been locked in their own countries and have explored alternative means to conduct research through, for example, international collaboration and online interviews.

This special issue is a response to such a dire situation. Eight authors based in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Nigeria, and Zambia report the on-the-ground reality of the educational crisis they have observed, with some presenting primary data they collected through surveys and interviews virtually and in person as well as through document reviews.

Soon after the spread of COVID-19, the governments of these eight countries imposed lockdown measures, leading to school shut-downs. They changed new education policies and formed new ones while promising the right to education for every child, at least in their policy documents. Examples include authorizing local schools to determine how to continue education in Malaysia (Samsudin, 2021) and adopting an auto-promotion policy following the cancellation of national exams in Bangladesh (Das & Kusakabe, 2021). In response to these policy changes and school closures, all eight countries presented here attempted to digitize education using the internet, mobile phones, TV, and radio. Malaysia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Nigeria have observed relative success in applying the online mode of education, while Madagascar, Malawi, and Zambia have struggled to shift to virtual learning platforms, which in turn led these countries to focus on implementing safety measures in the existing educational infrastructure (Appendix 1). One common theme that emerged from the eight papers involves the widened inequality between the haves and the have-nots within their countries, and this is likely to be observed between countries. The eight countries implemented different countermeasures – ranging from effecting school closure and altering existing education policies to shifting to virtual modes of teaching and learning – to combat the educational crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether and how these measures have contributed and will continue to contribute to overcoming the education crisis remains to be seen.

References

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