THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

BY
Dr Usman Jimoh Abdulkareem: Kwara State College of Education, Oro;
Email: kareemusman32@gmail.com
&
Lawal Tajudeen Omoluabi: Kwara State College of Education, Oro
E-mail: olaadua2030@gmail.com

Abstract
Nigeria contributes approximately 20% of the total global out-of-school population. Therefore, there was struggle going on prior to COVID-19 to ensure young children stay in school and have access to proper education. On 19 March 2020, the Federal Ministry of Education approved school closures as a response to the pandemic. The pandemic has unmasked substantial inequities in the education sector. The COVID-19 pandemic is revolutionizing digital and online education globally but children in rural and underserved communities in many parts of the country, are being left behind because they are not equipped to adapt or transition to the new methods of learning. Private and non-governmental sectors are tirelessly working to salvage this situation. This paper therefore analyses the above mentioned problems as well as looked into how these problems could be stemmed down. It also argues for strategies that could be adopted even after the resumption of schools. The researchers rely on context analysis and employs secondary data such as published and unpublished materials like text books, journals, newspapers and internet materials to gather and analyse the required data. Based on the above, the researchers recommended among others that Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and government can do much to improve the quality of, and increase access to, education for poor children in underserved communities.
Keywords: COVID-19, Development, Education, Vulnerable communities

Introduction
Nigeria is the largest country in Africa in terms of population and has approximately 20% of the total out of school children population in the world. Adding to this challenge is the demographic pressure with about 11,000 newborns every day that overburdens the system capacity to deliver quality education. In the Northern part of Nigeria for example, almost two-thirds of students are functionally illiterate. In addition to this challenge is the direct threat to schooling, especially for girls, emanating from political insecurity through insurgent activities, and attacks on schools. Each state created an education sector plan to outline its priorities and objectives. At the inception of the coronavirus outbreak, no one could have imagined that Nigeria would have over 75,000 confirmed cases and over 1,000 deaths. More so, no one could have been prepared for the ensuing closure of all schools nationwide that has led to a major disruption in the academic calendar.

According to a 2019 Executive Summary on Poverty and Inequality by the National Bureau of Statistics, 40.1% of the population in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and the largest producer of oil in Africa, is classified as poor (NBS, 2019). That is, on average, four out of 10 Nigerians has per capita expenditure below $400. A UNICEF report states that 10.5 million of the

country's children aged 5-14 years are not in school. Only 61% of 6 to 11-years-old regularly attend primary schools (UNICEF, 2019). Some states in the north east and north west of the country have more than half of the girls not enrolled in schools as a result of negligence and early marriage; this marginalisation ensures that girls are deprived of basic education. The spread of the coronavirus initially spared Nigeria, like many other African countries, with zero recorded case as of January 2020. This luck however did not last. By the 28th of February, Nigeria reported its first case through a Nigerian UK returnee. As at the time of this research, Nigeria had recorded seventy-three thousand, one hundred and seventy-five (73,175) cases of infection, one thousand, one hundred and ninety-seven (1,197) deaths while sixty-six thousand and ninety (66,090) have been discharged.

The Federal Ministry of Education announced the temporary close-down of all schools in Nigeria, effective from March 23rd 2020, in a bid to curtail the spread of the coronavirus. Considering the state of Nigeria's education sector, pertinent questions arose: Do schools in Nigeria have the technology to cater for about 46 million students affected by the closure? Do households have the facilities to engage their children and adolescents alike in remote learning? Do teachers have the resources to deliver live lessons or record a massive open online courses (MOOC) styled lessons? Unlike other countries, the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education's directive for school-closure then did not come with any clear-cut policy measures on how to mitigate learning disruptions for children or how to address the digital divide. However, it follows that education is not paramount to the Nigerian government at this time. The only well-documented response is the Nigeria Education in Emergency Working Group (NEIEWG) Strategy published on April 7th, 2020. The objective of the strategy is to mitigate the negative impact of school closures on students and teachers, especially in North-East Nigeria. While government efforts in the health and economic sectors must be commended, ignoring the education sector would be disastrous. As emphasised by UNESCO, temporary school closures come with high social and economic costs, with severe impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Adolescents on the higher end of the socio-economic spectrum are experiencing less disruption to their learning because their private schools are well-equipped with ICT infrastructure and they can afford remote learning resources at home. The majority that would be left struggling are the students from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds, who do not have access to computers and other devices outside schools. In many cases, these children live in communities with poor or non-existent internet connectivity and unreliable power supply. Inevitably, this digital divide will aggravate the learning disparities among these children (Amorighoye, 2020).

COVID-19: Impending Situation Threatens to Deepen Nigeria's Education Crisis
The past few weeks have ushered in a range of government sanctioned and structure-shifting risk-control directives across Nigeria and the Globe, in an attempt to curtail the spread of the deadly coronavirus disease otherwise known as COVID-19. From both local and international airport closures, to a nationwide closure of all schools, and now, a two-week lockdown of three major states; Lagos, Abuja and Ogun, as if this will contain the effect of the virus, it eventually led to the total lockdown of all the states of the nation. Peradventure, the ramifications from the slowdown/shutdown of economic activity are poised to be severe on Nigerian. It is especially critical because in the backdrop of COVID-19, the global economic crisis and the recent slump in

oil prices are further expected to intensify the impending economic crises, and create sharp shocks that will reshape the economy in the nearest future. For some sectors, the immediate ramifications are evident. One of such sectors is the basic education sector, the impact of which has been largely felt by students. The nationwide school closures, no doubt have disrupted learning and access to vital school-provided services for a record number of students in Nigeria. According to UNESCO, almost 40 million learners have been affected by the nationwide school closures in Nigeria, of which over 91 percent are primary and secondary school learners (UNESCO, 2020). In a short time, COVID-19 has disrupted the landscape of learning in Nigeria by limiting how students can access learning across the country.

For an already fragile education system, the COVID-19 pandemic poses unprecedented challenges on the government, educationists and stakeholders that will highlight and could strengthen some of the cracks in the system. As the nation begins to grapple with these challenges, a key question that readily comes to mind is: Is the Nigerian education system designed to adapt rapidly to the changing world? Given the state of affairs in the world today, the nation's ability to ensure continuation of learning depends largely on its ability to swiftly harness available technology, provides adequate infrastructure and mobilizes stakeholders to prepare alternative learning programmes (Amorighoye, 2020). Generally, Nigeria's education sector is not adapting, and is expected to struggle on that front for the foreseeable future. However, the consequential socio-economic burden will be borne disproportionately by students in public schools, as compared to those in private schools. While several private schools have begun to initiate distance learning programmes and taking advantage of the myriad of ICT-learning opportunities provided by the international community, the government limited by funds and persistent deficiencies in planning, is yet to announce any official plans for providing distance learning opportunities during the lock down, especially for public schools. The implication being that these students in public schools currently have no formal learning plans and might have missed learning altogether.

In this piece, this paper examines some of the immediate and long-term impacts of the closures, and proffering suggestions as to how the government can mitigate these consequences. Additionally, the writer is looking towards the future, and making prescriptions for how they might turn this disruptive crisis into an opportunity to address several of its pre-pandemic supply side education problems.

Impacts of COVID-19 on Education Sector in Nigeria
Looking at this crisis, the following are the effects on the education sector:
1. **Missed learning for the majority of pre-pandemic in-school-students:** According to UNESCO (2020), about 35.9 million primary and secondary school learners were then out-of-school as a result of the school closures. For primary schools, this number totals approximately 25.6 million pupils, of which about 87 percent (23.5 million) are pupils enrolled in public schools. The numbers are just as stark for secondary school learners. Of the roughly 10.3 million secondary school students who are out-of-school as a result of the closures, approximately 81 percent (8.4 million) of them are public school students. In Nigeria, school opportunity is correlated to income level, and public schools differ from private schools in the populations they serve. While private schools serve learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds who are

willing and able to pay more to access better resources offered by private schools, public schools which are usually free, comprise students from lower socio-economic households and low income areas. In instances where distance learning opportunities are available, uptake will be low from the students in the public schools' category, as a result of poor infrastructure such as lack of electricity or poor/no internet connectivity. Opportunities to learn within the homes are also limited, given that a parent's ability to provide education support to their children will be shaped by their own level of educational attainment, financial capacity, general literacy level and other commitments. Looking at the significant relationship between educational attainment, income level and the correlation between parentals income level and school choice, one can infer that the literacy level of parents in public schools in Nigeria might be lower than their private school counterparts. In instances where the parents are educated, investing the time to train their children during the pandemic might be a luxury (Thelma & Adedeji, 2019). For Nigeria, the reality is simple - while the school closures are necessary to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, not until the ban on movement was lifted and schools were reopened, majority of students would not have been learning.

2. **Loss of access to vital school-provided services**: Beyond the missed learning opportunities, students in Nigeria are also losing access to the daily meals made available by the federally-funded school feeding programmes, especially in some states that are enjoying the programme. Nigeria has one of the largest school feeding programmes in the world, with the World Food Programme estimating that in 2019, Nigeria's Home grown Schools Feeding Initiative provided access to daily meals to over 9 million children in over 40,000 public schools (UNESCO, 2020). The benefits of school feeding programmes extend beyond the immediate education benefits of the meals provided, such as encouraging enrolment in schools and boosting learning. School feeding programmes yield larger socio-economic benefits to children, their families and society at large. Children from low socio-economic groups benefitted greatly in terms of boosting their health and nutrition, providing social protection and safety nets.

- Health and Nutrition - For some students, especially those from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds, the daily meals provided at schools are their primary sources of healthy and nutritious meals. With schools' closure then, over 9 million public school students are being deprived of this benefit. Beyond feeding, Nigeria's feeding programme also offers health services, including deworming and immunizations for students in public schools across 17 states. This closure unfortunately affects access to some basic health services for poorer children.

- Social Protection and Social Safety Nets - Over 50 percent of students accessing free meals fall into first and second wealth quintiles, representing the poorest 40 percent of the population, in a country where over 50 percent of the country live below the poverty line. As empirical evidence has revealed, people living below the poverty line usually spend between half and three-quarters of their income on food, representing a significant proportion of a poor household income. For each individual meal provided, the value can represent up to 10 percent of a family's income; for families with more than one child in school, this small figure can represent significant savings for families. The school feeding programme can provide safety nets by boosting income for households. The absence of this daily meal is likely posing potential challenges for households, especially during the lockdown in economic activities across the country (UNESCO, 2020).

3. **Leaving more kids behind** - A longer-term impact of these school closures would be deepened educational inequality. While some international development partners (UNESCO, for example) have put together and provided access to ICT-based resources to foster learning, uptake will depend largely on the level and quality of digital and internet access and language accessibility (as most programmes are available in English or other non-native Nigerian languages).

According to the Digital 2020 Global Overview Report published in January 2020, about 60 percent of Nigerians are not connected to the internet. The statistics for mobile phones which could also be used as a learning medium, are more hopeful. According to the report, around 169.2 million people, 83 percent of Nigerians have access to mobile phone connections. However, of these, 50 percent - around 84.5 million people, reside in urban areas (UNESCO, 2020). For the population with access, the proportion would be skewed towards high socio-economic households and urban households. An overwhelming majority of whom are private school students who already having learning advantage over their public school peers. For children from poor backgrounds who tend to have less access to internet connectivity, computers and other devices, and reside in rural areas where local languages take dominance over English, ICT-learning uptake will be limited. The inequity in access to ICT-based learning has the adverse effect of further intensifying the existing disparities in learning outcomes along socio-economic lines, and the urban-rural divide. Assuming the school closures are indefinite; these students would have continued to fall further behind. For students with learning disabilities, and those living in fragile and conflict-affected regions, the outlook is even bleaker (Hussain, 2020).

This raises a major challenge around educational inequality due to the technological landscape and income driven digital-divide. How do we therefore harness available technology to support already marginalized students especially during the closures? If this is unaddressed, the gap in education quality and inadvertently socio-economic equality could become more extreme as a result of the lock down.

Mitigation Strategies to Stem the Rising Learning Crisis: Distance Learning Through Low-Cost Technology reaching the vulnerable population in Nigeria will require adopting multiple learning delivery modalities ranging from television, radio and SMS-based mobile platforms that are more easily available to the poor. With over 80 percent of the adult population having access to radios and phones, it would be possible to reach most children left behind with targeted instructions via these channels. However, while online platforms offer personalized learning, other delivery modalities require a central planner, as well coordination between all three tiers of government and the private sectors (media platform owners). This is where the role of the Ministry of Education will crucially extend beyond traditional policy making and regulations. The commissioners of education could help in the deployment and use of these tools within states, while the federal government coordinates the state efforts by plugging capacity and finance gaps. The government could draw on the experience of Sierra Leone, where the Ebola crisis led to school closures for about 9 months. To reach the most vulnerable and excluded children, the Government of Sierra Leone harnessed radios and televisions to deliver lessons (Folasade, 2020). Whatever strategy the government chooses to incorporate, they must ensure that it is cost-

effective (at least available within the home) and easy to use (children and their parents/guardians have some knowledge of it beforehand or can easily learn to use them).

Empowering and supporting parents: Parents/guardians irrespective of their education levels will be required to play a pivotal role to ensure that learning is unrestrained. In order to ensure proper uptake of the available resources, the government also need to ensure that parents are equipped to create a conducive learning environment and support children in this new mode of learning. At this time, parents would be required to act as intermediaries between the school management/government and the children in learning delivery. In some instances, parents would need to take on the role of a teacher in home schooling their children, although relying on guidance from school. Additionally, most of the learning mediums would be shared amongst household members and the responsibility will fall on the parents to determine and allocate usage among family members. Therefore, it is essential that the government supports them in understanding and executing their roles during this crucial time (Hussain, 2020).

Ensuring Access to Nutritious Meals and Vital Services: As part of palliatives to cushion the economic effect of the lockdown, the government announced that it intends to sustain the school feeding programme to children. While this is reassuring, it was not cleared at the onset how this would be implemented. For example, will the government send daily prepared meals to households or would the cost of the meals be monetized? Eventually, this doubt was emptied by government, claiming that the children designed to benefit from the programme were actually been taken care of. However, this claim was widely criticised by many Nigerians because there was no parameter to measure the authenticity of this statement. By extension, there is a need to design a strategy to keep other educational support programmes flowing. The pandemic already underscores the importance of vaccinations, hence windows to vaccinate children for protection against diseases need to be opened. Moreover, while the children are at home; house-to-house vaccination ought to have been deployed. Other vital services such as sanitary pads for girls can also be distributed via this means. Peradventure, since these services are an integral part of learning, scaling them up during this difficult economic times might be crucial. The government is therefore enjoined to seek for appropriate measures through which the palliative measure in terms of daily meals will reach the targeted entire households (Folasade, 2020).

Reaching the most vulnerable: In keeping the flow of these education support programmes, the educational needs of the hard-to-reach families could also be met. Lessons and homework can go together with physical deliveries of additional education support, while each family develops their home grown strategy to cover the materials. Angola, Uganda and Zambia have already embedded this approach in their COVID-19 response strategy. The key requirement would be the conscious and active involvement of school administrators in the various government interventions (UNESCO, 2020).

Education Financing: The fiscal space to fund education has further shortened with the shock on government revenue and economic downturn arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many items in the 2020 Education Sector appropriation bill, could not be implemented due to the drastic financial shortfall. Yet, more funding is required to keep learning going or scaled- up education support programmes as part of the government's palliative measures. For the government, reducing costs will require re-prioritising its plans in light of this new reality. The most urgent needs at the moment will be improving teachers' motivation, learners' preparedness and galvanizing domestic digital and media enterprises. This needs to be complemented with

innovative sourcing of learning infrastructure especially during the pandemic. For example, reaching children through existing school and home appliances and gadgets will be more cost-effective (Hussain, 2020). Greater involvement of domestic philanthropists and digital entrepreneurs can reduce the financial burden of sustaining learning during this crisis period (Folasade, 2020).

Tapping into Global Resources: The World Bank, UNESCO and other development partners have already rolled out number of education resources that developing countries can readily deploy. The technological industry in general is also providing free online platforms to engage directly with students and to assist school administrators and governments to identify technological solutions that support remote learning. On a larger scale, the countries should explore international loans and grants facilities for education as part of mitigation and recovery plans in weathering the COVID-19 crisis (UNESCO, 2020).

Ways COVID-19 Pandemic will Re-Shape Education in Nigeria: Turning Challenges into Opportunities

The immediate consequences of the pandemic might be calamitous but it however offers a unique turning point. Nevertheless, this could serve as an opportunity to learn, reshape and build resilience into the educational system in Nigeria. Policy makers have a unique opportunity to explore how this emerging reality could usher in a new education architecture that tackles two of the nation's most urgent pre-pandemic education crisis: access (as the country has the highest out-of-school children in the world); and quality (as majority of children in school are not learning during the lock down).

The crisis has pointed to a number of fundamental action steps, two of which are crucial now and beyond:
• the imperative need to embed appropriate technology into learning; and
• the urgency to bridge educational divides that currently exist, and could further be aggravated with a shift in education approaches.

One emerging evidence from this crisis is the need to embed more technology into the classroom. Technological solutions like adaptive learning technology, can ensure personalized learning with minimal teacher involvement. This has potential to deliver better learning experiences at low-costs (Folasade, 2020). Yet, the pace of adoption of these technologies has been slow and uneven in Nigeria. The post coronal virus pandemic is an opportunity to invest in technology in both the private and public-school systems. To achieve this system widely, it will be important to encourage public-private educational partnerships. Various stakeholders, including the government, internet service providers, phone providers, educational professionals, among others, would need to collaborate to drive the required innovation. Conscious effort is also required to bridge the digital divide, by ensuring that the cost of technology adoption is low. Overall, introducing innovative technology into classrooms could help in improving learning outcomes across the board (Adegoke, 2020).

The crisis is adding to the policy menu towards addressing the out-of-school children as the forced closure of schools then has sprung up various modalities in reaching children that were out of schools. Yet, the prevailing policy response to the out-of-children problem in Nigeria has focused only on bringing children to schools. Going forward, some of the learning delivery

modalities adopted during the crisis should also be explored for the pre-pandemic out-of-school population. The approach will be similar to the School Meets Learner Approach used to bring education to girls in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria: Taking education to children in situations where cultural and economic circumstances prevent them from accessing school. While the end goal must remain to bring all school-age children to schools, finding ways to reach children at home can be part of the process. COVID-19, no doubt has created a critical gap in school-based (learning) contingency planning and emergency preparedness within the education sector in Nigeria. Learning-based contingency planning is essential to ensure learning continuity especially during pandemic. This however, would create an avenue to protect students and educators as well as to build resilience within the education sector. While the government released a COVID-19 contingency plan, the information contained within the document is expected to focus on keeping schools safe during the pandemic.

The counselling section of the ministry of education can however help in providing information to the students above precautionary measures and actions to take to curb the spread. Despite the fact that this is beneficial information, a school-based contingency plan that does not ensure continuity of learning despite the challenge, is incomplete (Adegoke, 2020). Perhaps, this COVID-19 driven school closure is the crisis we needed to identify and some crucial sector-wide gaps created. The COVID-19 pandemic is surely not the last crisis that will threaten school continuity in Nigeria, given the increase in the number of infectious diseases worldwide or the conflict in the North East. It is therefore imperative that the government creates a holistic contingency plan that goes beyond addressing school-based safety measures alone, but also identify ways to ensure learning continuing and provide support for both students and teachers during any crisis. Predictably, the COVID-19 pandemic will be resolved either through a breakthrough in treatment options, the development of a vaccine or with the world population developing herd immunity. However, without intentional and concerted effort, its effects would have a lasting impact on the trajectory of education. The onus is now on us. Do we allow this crisis to further deepen our education crisis, or do we seize the opportunity to effect change that could address both pandemic-driven and pre-pandemic challenges? These are crucial questions that need to be addressed by every stake-holders in the education sector.

Conclusion
Education is an escape route for poverty, therefore, Nigerian government is striving to remain committed to ensuring quality education for all children. Government is working towards supporting schools that serve children from low-income families to build lasting pathways towards improving education quality. According to the research, Nigeria contributes approximately 20% of the total global out-of-school population. However, a struggle was on going prior to COVID-19 in order to ensure young children stay in school and have access to proper education. On 19 March 2020, the Federal Ministry of Education approved school closures as a response to the pandemic. States in the federation contextualized this, with the Lagos State Ministry of Education releasing a schedule of radio and TV lessons for students in public schools. The pandemic has unmasked substantial inequities in the education sector. Private and non-governmental sectors are tirelessly working to salvage this situation. Projects such as recapitulate and Teach for Nigeria hope to ensure proper tools for education are available to all in some states, especially Lagos and Ogun States. However, one major issue that may stem from this inequality

is that, these children who currently cannot keep up with their peers because of inaccessibility to digital tools may never catch up and will continue to feel the effect of this gap long even after the pandemic is over. This may result in a severely diminishing pool of young adults who have not reaped the necessary skills to stay ahead in the future. With Nigeria already behind in preparing its young people for the workplace in the future, the effects of the pandemic further worsen this issue.

Recommendations
1. It is therefore becoming pertinent to take some measures which will help to bridge the divide when the problem of the pandemic subside. These measures center largely around Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and government aid.
2. PPPs can do much to improve the quality of, and increase access to education for poor children in underserved communities. More schools in such areas, would go some ways to start shifting the teacher/student ratio which has hit alarming lows of 1:83 at points during the past decade.
3. The government could further mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 on education by providing solar-powered educational devices, pre-loaded with offline academic resources such as the tablets used in Sun Books project to students in disadvantaged and vulnerable communities. Of course, these policy measures would require significant financial investment but such investment is worthwhile for the progress of the economy in the long-term.
4. Government aid is needed in terms of investing in educational tools of the future alongside a total revamp of the educational sector. Reforms in the national curriculum post-pandemic would be an effective way to bridge the gap in inequality.

References
Adegoke, C. F. (2020). *Impact of Covid-19 on Education for Vulnerable Children*, Allen Avenue, Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria.
Amorighoye, T. A. (2020). *COVID-19 has Exposed the Education Divide in Nigeria*: This is how we can close it. Curator, Lagos Hub, Global Shapers Community, Ikeja, Lagos.
Folasade, A. (2020). *Education For All*: Lagos COVID-19 Crisis Management. A lecture delivered on behalf of the Hon. Commissioner, Lagos State Ministry of Education, Ikeja, Lagos State.
Hussain, T. A. (2020). *Education, women advancement and good leadership*. Master of Development Economics student at SOAS University of London, under the Commonwealth Shared Scholarship scheme.
National Bureau of Statistics. (2019). *Executive Summary on Poverty and Inequality*. A paper delivered at the Conference of Education Summit, Federal Ministry of Education, Ikeja, Lagos.
Thelma, O & Adedeji, A. (2019). *How has Education Been Impacted*? A Crisis Within a Crisis. Center for the Study of the Economies of Africa.
UNESCO. (2019). *The World Economic Forum Covid Action Platform*. Retrieved fromwww. knowcovid19.ng; UNESCO
UNESCO. (2020). *Data on education as compiled by Institute for Statistics from official responses to surveys and from reports provided by education authorities in each country*.