

CASE STUDY

COVID-19 and the education response in Afghanistan: The challenge of reaching marginalised learners

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Version 1

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This report is our own work and we also acknowledge all the sources of information used in it.

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Key messages

- After the onset of COVID-19 in Afghanistan, the government ordered nationwide school closures and proposed three modalities of learning in a COVID-19 environment: self-learning, distance learning and learning in small groups (these are discussed below).
- Self-learning was withdrawn as an option due to the cost of producing and distributing printed curriculum-based material to students and educators.
- The central component of the Ministry of Education's distance learning response was to shift the existing Afghan school curriculum to remote classes using the internet, mobile phones, radio and television. However, the low penetration of television, radio and internet-based devices across the country, especially in rural areas, cast doubt on the efficacy of the distance-based response. Estimates show that less than 30% of school-going children are able to access education in this form.
- Girls and children with disabilities were not explicitly prioritized in the response of the Afghan government, and currently there are no monitoring systems to evaluate what the uptake of alternative learning methods has been for all school-going children, including girls.

Impact of COVID-19 on education in Afghanistan

This case study explores the government's response to the impacts of COVID-19 on the education system in Afghanistan, drawing on both desk-based research and primary data collection through distance-based key informant interviews. A total of 11 interviews were conducted with different stakeholders.

Context

In addition to the obvious health threat, the COVID-19 pandemic presents a significant challenge to the education system in Afghanistan. According to the Afghan Ministry of Education, 12 million children currently make up the school-going population. Yet UNICEF Afghanistan (2020) reports that Afghanistan has some of the world's poorest education indicators: an estimated 3.7 million children are out of school, 60% of whom are girls. Despite these stark indicators, education in Afghanistan remains pivotal to young people's ability to overcome the many obstacles they face, and is transformative for families and communities.

Structure of the education sector and governance

The Education Law of 2008 in Afghanistan mandates nine years of compulsory education (primary education and lower secondary education). Free education through to the bachelor level is a constitutional right in Afghanistan. However, public sector capacity to deliver education is relatively low, as the number of schools falls short of the number of children of school-going age (50% of primary school-aged children are not enrolled in school), lack of skilled educators (only 48% of teachers meet minimum academic qualifications for teaching), low financial and limited transportation to and from school (UNICEF Afghanistan, 2020; Save the Children, 2020). In the last decade, dozens of fee-charging private institutions, most of them also for-profit, have emerged to absorb young Afghans' growing demand for higher education. The costs of private education are variable and largely unregulated.

Currently, there are approximately 18,000 schools across Afghanistan, both primary and secondary, of which 800 are private. Both public and private schools are centrally governed by the Ministry of Education, which communicates policies to the director of education in each province, who then disseminates new policies to all school principals in their respective provinces (WENR, 2016).

Response timeline

The capital city, Kabul, along with some other provinces, suffers from severe cold weather and snowfall in winter, so schools have winter holidays from December to March each year. In the winter of 2019, schools were on holiday from December to 22nd March, with the new school year scheduled to start on 23rd March.¹

After considering the rapid spread of the virus, the Ministry of Education decided not to start the new school year on 23rd March 2020, and two days later extended the closure to all public and private educational institutions across the country. The first vice president of

¹ In some warmer areas school had already opened before 23rd March and were subsequently closed.

Afghanistan, Amrullah Saleh, presented the formal COVID-19 response plan on 22nd April. Lockdown was staggered throughout the country following the wave of the epidemic. On 7th May 2020, an emergency response plan for COVID-19 was prepared by the Ministry of Education in order to continue educational service delivery to students in their homes. This plan encouraged remote or distance learning as the main approach, however, there were, and continue to be, many challenges that school-going students face. These are explored in greater detail below.

The central component of the Ministry of Education's formal response, 'Alternate Plan for COVID-19', was to shift the existing Afghan school curriculum into remote classes using the following platforms: internet, mobile phones, radio and television. A spokeswoman for the Ministry of Education acknowledged that many remote areas lacked access to the internet, radio and television (discussed further below). Therefore, in addition to remote approaches, the Afghan government promoted face-to-face teaching to small groups of five to eight students, while observing necessary health measures and social distancing, as advised by the Ministry of Health.

Generating evidence for policy decisions

The Ministry of Education's distance learning plan emerged from incremental consultations carried out with directors of television and radio channels, the director of electricity, and provincial directors of education. The provincial directors of education in each province relayed data from the Education Management Information System about numbers of schools in each district, the number of students, and general accessibility to resources to the Ministry of Education, which fed this into the Ministry of Education's 'Alternate Plan for COVID-19'. This proposed three modalities of learning in a COVID-19 environment: self-learning, distance learning and learning in small groups.

In areas that had access to the internet, radio and television, the Ministry of Education promoted the use of a distance learning platform. In areas that lacked access to these platforms, and to electricity, a small group-learning plan was implemented. Each province had the discretion to choose which option to implement according to their individual needs and levels of access.

Self-learning

The government plan initially stated that all social science subjects, such as history, geography, sociology and Islamic education (lower-secondary and upper-secondary, grades 7–12) were to be self-learned. Materials were to be provided for students to study these subjects by themselves, without the help of any tutor or video lectures.

The study guide² designed for self-learning in these subjects was adapted from a Commonwealth of Learning handbook on creating learning materials,³ where the focus was on activities, examples and self-assessment, with feedback in the plan around the most frequent mistakes made by learners as they worked through the activities.

Unfortunately, the Ministry of Education's self-learning plan relied on the production, printing and distribution of these materials to over 9 million learners across 18,000 schools. This was logistically ambitious, given the context of an emergency response (Baiza, 2020). In addition, the approach did not cater for students of primary school, grades 1–3, as they would be unable to use the material independently and many could not rely on help from their parents, who are mostly illiterate (UNESCO, 2018).⁴

Distance learning

The second approach, distance-learning, required students to use the internet, radio or television to gain access to educational materials.

Currently, science subjects are taught through television channels and social sciences subjects are taught over the radio. According to a spokeswoman for the Ministry of Education, Nuria Nuhzat, this division was based on the government's understanding that the sciences (physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics) include formulae and experiments which need to be visually represented to students, while social science subjects (history, sociology and Islamic studies) are theoretical and hence do not require visual representation. The content for television and radio was developed by a group of qualified professional teachers who were trained by the Ministry of Education in how to record and prepare the materials.

In addition to the materials available on television and radio, the Ministry of Education recorded and uploaded video lectures for grades 1–12 on its online portal, Maarif.af, which allows any student to watch his/her class lectures online or download them and watch offline at any time. Video lectures on Maarif.af are available in both Dari and Pashto, the two official languages of the country, increasing accessibility.

As noted earlier, distance learning relied on access to technology in the form of the internet, radio or television. However, as [Table 1](#) shows, access to each technology is far from complete across the country. Internet access is very low overall, with a high disparity between access in urban areas (31%) and rural areas (9%). In urban areas, television and

2 Playbook for the development of self-instructional material for home-based learning during school closures in Afghanistan, <https://inee.org/resources/playbook-development-self-instructional-material-home-based-learning-during-school>.

3 A typical unit in self-instructional material would follow the below structure: Title of the learning unit. Introduction. Learning outcomes. Resources needed for this unit (this section might be repeated several times depending on the number of topics/subtopics; set time limits for each activity). Topic heading/sub-heading. Read (pages/topics from the textbook). Read (new, supplemental text, written by teacher). Do (activity written by teacher; with answer grid for the learner). Do (self-assessment written by teacher; with answer grid for the learner). Summary/key points.

4 According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2018), 12,053,875 Afghans are illiterate. The illiterate population is 40% (4,848,681) male and 60% (7,205,193) female.

telephones (though it is unclear if this includes smart phones) have a high penetration, at over 90%, but coverage falls drastically in rural areas, at 57% for television and 30% for phones. Radio access is higher in rural areas (62%) compared to urban areas (42%).

Therefore, while radio would be the preferred medium for distance learning in rural areas (though still far from universal), television carries the highest potential for access in urban areas. Maarif.af is primarily an internet-based learning platform and primary interviews showed that students who do not have access to the internet or smartphones are able to obtain video lectures from school principals via USBs, memory cards or CDs to watch them at home. In this way, according to the Deputy Director of Education for Paktika province, students are able to access distance learning either directly or indirectly.

Resources	Urban areas	Rural areas	Total
Electricity	N/A	N/A	77%
Radio	42%	62%	–
Television	91%	57%	–
Internet	31%	9%	–
Phones	90%	30%	–

Source: The COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan, Ministry of Education, Afghanistan

Table 1

Technology penetration in Afghanistan

Small-group learning

The third approach articulated by the Ministry of Education recognised the limited coverage of electricity or the necessary devices to access distance learning. At the discretion of the provincial directors of education, the Ministry of Education mandated that, where required, smaller groups of between five and eight learners could be taught face-to-face by teachers in the open air, while following guidance on social distancing provided by the Ministry of Health. This guidance included keeping a distance of two metres between individuals, wearing masks and gloves throughout the teaching sessions, and frequently using hand sanitisers. However, to date there is no information on how often this approach is taken and/or where the supplies for protection are obtained for both students and teachers.

According to the Director of Education in Kunduz province, only core subjects such as physics, biology, chemistry and mathematics are taught through small-group learning, while social science subjects are neglected in face-to-face teaching, as they are considered amenable to pure self-learning.

Challenges

Any emergency response is a challenging, fast-paced environment that requires close monitoring and adjustment to ensure that the services provided are appropriate and meet the needs of the target population. The research interviews highlighted that some provincial directors of education had undertaken regular feedback sessions with schools

within their region of responsibility, however, there appears to be minimal systematic monitoring and feedback mechanisms in place from the central government. As a result, it is difficult to assess the success or failure of the approaches promoted by the government. According to the Head of Policy Makers for the Ministry of Education, the government does not have accurate figures on the number of students who have access to the different types of learning discussed above, as they have not yet conducted a survey to gather this information.

The directors of education from Paktika and Nimroz provinces both stated during their interviews that there was no formal reporting and monitoring system, even at the provincial level, to measure the effectiveness of the COVID-19 response plan. The directors of education of each province have been arranging meetings with schoolteachers and principals to check on how to facilitate student access to learning materials. However, the challenges highlighted below continue to impact the uptake of alternative learning plans in Afghanistan.

Access to infrastructure

The main challenge with distance-based learning that relies on television, radio and internet is the presence of adequate infrastructure, both in terms of coverage and quality. According to the World Bank, 98.7% of Afghanistan's population has electricity, but only for two or three hours a day due to the practice of load shedding. Aljazeera reports that 59 districts (14.5%) of the total 407 districts under Taliban rule, have no internet access at all. Similarly, some students cannot use radio channels for audio lectures because of the weak signals in some remote areas of the country. An underlying access issue is income poverty, that is, with 55% of people living below the poverty line, most households cannot afford the internet or the devices needed (ADB, 2020). Recent research by Save the Children (2020) shows that across six Afghan provinces, only 28.6% of children could access distance learning programmes through television, 13.8% through radio and just 0.2% through the internet.

Consequently, responsiveness to school closures during the pandemic has relied on the discretion and capacity of individuals who have not received any government mandated training. Interviews showed that school principals and teachers in rural areas, where penetration of infrastructure is lowest, were volunteering their time to record lectures and sharing them with students through WhatsApp groups, USBs, memory cards and CDs. Regional media reported older students turning into teachers without government training or support to plug learning gaps during the pandemic (see [Table 2](#)).

For the last two months 17-year-old student Shabir Ahmad has recorded videos on different subjects ranging from maths to science and uploaded them to his YouTube channel. He has more than 1,600 followers and answers their questions over WhatsApp.

Talking to Arab News, Ahmad said that during the school closures, he wanted to 'help students not to waste their time and help them in their learning'. Ahmad's efforts have been appreciated by his followers and government officials.

Table 2

Afghan student turns teacher

Lack of familiarity with internet-based devices

Not every school-going child in Afghanistan has access to digital devices or internet connectivity at home, either due to income levels, cultural norms or lack of basic infrastructure to support the functioning of devices should they exist. Internet penetration rates are low, at 14% across the country, and students and educators who are able to access the internet often lack training on how to use internet-based devices. According to one of the school principals interviewed for this study: 'Currently, teachers are facing a lot of complications. Most of them are not technology friendly. They do not know how to use applications to help students'.

During an interview conducted for this research, a private school principal in Kabul said: 'School teachers received no formal training during the pandemic'. Pre-pandemic, most teachers in the country were not familiar with digital devices, according to interviewees, while during the pandemic they have not been provided with either the devices themselves or a curriculum on how to facilitate distance learning and how to employ such devices to impart teaching. In its official plan for education during the pandemic, the Ministry of Education committed to conducting distance capacity building programmes for teachers and principals. The Head of Policy Makers at the Ministry of Education stated in an interview that the government was working to address this specific challenge by creating applications and soft materials for distance learning. This would allow parents who are literate to home school their children, or for students of higher grades to learn on their own. However, interviews with users did not reveal the existence or uptake of such initiatives. Given that only 30% of women and 55% of men in the country are literate, many parents cannot help their children study (World Bank, 2020).

Marginalised learners

A major gap in the design of the response to COVID-19 is the lack of provision for marginalised learners across the country, such as girls and students with disabilities.⁵

The disparity between access to education for girls and boys was stark in Afghanistan before the pandemic: the country largely only has gender-segregated schools and there are far more schools for boys than girls. By upper secondary school, fewer than 36% of students are girls (Barr, 2020), and 35% of Afghan girls marry as children (UNICEF, 2019). Girls who did not study are three times more likely to marry before age 18 than girls who completed secondary education (HRW, 2017). Within this context, COVID-19 exacerbated existing inequalities with a reported increase in pressure on girls to marry early (Glinksi, 2020). Due to the strict culture and norms in remote areas, the majority of girls do not own a personal mobile phone and are restricted in their access to television and radio. This limits the degree to which distance learning programmes can reach them, even in their homes (Hussain, 2015).

According to the Accessibility Organisation for Afghan Disabled, a non-governmental organisation, 280,000 school-aged children have some kind of disability. However, by the end of 2017, only 4,000 children with disabilities were enrolled in school. In a recent

5 A further marginalised group includes children, especially girls, living in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan. For a detailed discussion of access and quality of education outside Afghan government-controlled areas, please see the 2020 report by Human Rights Watch, entitled *You have no right to complain: Education, social restrictions, and justice in Taliban-held Afghanistan*.

interview, the executive director of the Accessibility Organisation for Afghan Disabled said there were students with hearing and vision disabilities currently unable to take any classes because the Ministry of Education had not made any special plan to support these learners during the pandemic. This was due to resource constraints already at play in dealing with the majority of learners.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Ministry of Education's three proposed approaches (self-learning, distance learning and learning in small groups) was compromised by limited capacity for printing materials and poor infrastructure across the country. The logistics associated with the first approach were insurmountable and it was abandoned. The second and third approaches were recommended to proceed. Although a lack of adequate infrastructure was highlighted to the Ministry of Education by provincial directors, the constraints were not fully taken into consideration within the proposed plan for alternative learning. Consequently, educators and students were left to innovate and improvise in order to access the educational resources necessary for learning.

Key informants for this rapid scan noted three significant gaps in the Ministry of Education's response over time. The first was the lack of a reporting and monitoring system, which made it difficult to ascertain the actual uptake of various learning methods and the impact on learning. Second, educators were not given adequate devices to implement distance learning (for example, laptops, an internet device), nor were they trained on how to prepare and adapt existing materials for dissemination and learning through these devices. Educators and students thus spent time in engaging with centrally produced content — videos and resources that informants reported were of high quality — and understanding how to make them accessible to students and adapt them to teaching and learning. However, these interactions were at the discretion of the educators and students, and depended on the capacity of both to absorb the materials in their current form. During interviews, a common sentiment that emerged around the government response to education was to recognise that, while the Ministry of Education's plan was ineffective in promoting coverage and quality of learning, the materials produced at the federal level did keep educators and students 'busy' during the lockdown.

After almost five months in lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, all universities re-opened in Afghanistan on 5th August. A spokesman for the Higher Education Ministry confirmed that students and professors were physically attending classes. 'Everyone will be required to wear masks, while adhering to social distancing, and the campus will be disinfected every day', the spokesman said. 'If we find a positive case among our students or professors, the individual will be sent to home quarantine with a two-week vacation', said the official.

By September 2020, schools in Afghanistan had gradually started re-opening amidst assurances from the Ministry of Education that all schools would follow guidelines on preventing the spread of COVID-19 (Saif, 2020).

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