

REPOA Brief



The effects of COVID-19 pandemic on enrollment rates and gender inequalities in Tanzania

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Key Messages

The enrollment of primary school children increased during the COVID-19 period than pre-COVID 19 period

The enrollment of girls in urban primary schools was higher than that of boys in the pre-COVID-19 period

Learning losses were relatively smaller due to the shorter lockdown period in Tanzania

Digital divide worsened the existing educational disparities between public primary schools in the rural areas and private primary schools in the urban areas.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and a one of the key drivers of socio-economic development. However, the recent outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated educational inequalities between girls and boys. At the national level, COVID-19 and its related containment measures led to school closures. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education systems globally, and Tanzania was no exception. With schools closing for extended periods and the shift to remote learning, the pandemic deepened existing gender gaps in education and between rural and urban. A study by Sebhatu et al. (2020), noted that school closures were a widely used intervention where learners had to stay at home and the learning process was halted indefinitely. In the pre-COVID-19 period, with the introduction of the fee-free basic education policy, primary enrolment rates in Tanzania increased by more than 2.5 million since 2013. By 2020, 15.4 million students were enrolled in Mainland Tanzania from pre-primary up to advanced level secondary education, but schools remained short of teachers as well as textbooks and basic infrastructure e.g. classrooms and furniture (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training 2020).

Despite those achievements, a study by Angrist et al. (2021), which estimated learning losses associated with school closures in Tanzania, found that the learning losses were relatively smaller compared to other countries in East African region. This trend is attributed to the shorter lockdown period that was enforced in the country. Meanwhile, children in the urban areas managed to access online learning materials.

Evidence shows that the repercussion of missing face-to-face learning is associated with lower test scores in mathematics and reading, largely due to a decrease in hours of teacher's instructions.

In addition, children from poor households lived in homes without devices or materials (such as radio, television, internet, and books) that are essential for home learning. From the gender lens, the challenges experienced by girls that had to do home learning coupled with household chores, which hinders the effectiveness of e-learning to promote gender equality. This policy brief explores the way enrollment rates of boys and girls were impacted before and after the pandemic and proposes strategies to address such inequalities.

Findings of the study

Enrolment rates in the pre-COVID-19 period

The primary education system in Tanzania starts from standard one to standard seven with the customary entry age of 7 years. Between 1980s and 1990s, around half of primary school children between 7–13 years attended primary school leading to an increase in the annual net enrolment rates (NER). According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), primary NER between the NPS 2014/15 and NPS 2020/21 increased for both girls and boys. However, girls continued to have a slightly higher primary NER than boys at the national level and in rural and urban areas. This improvement was attributed to the earlier efforts aimed at promoting Universal Primary Education (UPE) in the late 1970s which increased the enrolment rates (Valente 2019). Delesalle (2021) notes that the substantial primary education programmes that were implemented in the early 1970s significantly improved the access and quality of basic education. In addition, this improving trend was attributed to the enabling environment in the education sector at all levels, including legal and regulatory frameworks, governance institutions and policy reforms.

Some of the government initiatives as highlighted by the President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) includes the Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP) that started in 2002 and provided the underlying framework for educational reform at the district level, the 2015 Education for All (EFA) goal of increasing the net enrolment ratio of children in primary school under the Five-Year Development Plan I (FYDP I) 2011/12-2015/16. The Tanzania Development Vision 2025 which was launched in 1999 aspired the country to attain a high-quality standard of education for all that leads to “a well-educated and learning society”. There are also some sector-specific policy frameworks and reform initiatives in the country such as the 2007 ICT Policy for Basic Education that emphasize the incorporation of ICT at all schooling levels.

As shown in Table 1, 376 public primary schools equivalent to 57 percent in Dar es Salaam region and 727 privately-owned primary schools in Dodoma region were selected in 2017. On a comparison basis, Dar es Salaam has more privately-owned schools, approximately 43 percent than Dodoma, which has just 5 percent leading in turn, to educational inequalities.

Table 1: Number of selected Primary Schools and Total Enrollment by Sex in 2017

	Number of Primary Schools			Total Enrollment by Sex		
	Government (Public schools)	Non- Government (Private schools)	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Dar es Salaam	376 (57.4%)	279 (42.6%)	655	292,526	301,237	593,763
Dodoma	727 (95%)	35 (5%)	762	207,986	224,842	432,828

Source: Education Sector Performance Report (2017)

The enrolment rates in the post-COVID-19 period

The enrollment rate in the post-COVID 19 period rose for private and public schools, in Dar es Salaam relative to Dodoma in 2021.

... “Interestingly, PO-RALG witnessed an increasing number of enrollments for primary schools across the country despite the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic that resulted in low numbers of enrollments in other countries, Tanzania registered more primary student enrollments” ... (Director in the Division of Basic Education at the President's Office, Regional Administration and Local Government).

Data from the BEMIS (Basic Education Management Information System) managed by the PO-RALG (President's Office - Regional Administration and Local Government), reveals that while the government and Local Government Authorities (LGAs) embarked on deliberate measures to ensure continued education during school closures, the recovery of enrollment rates has been uneven across different regions in the country. However, Tanzania had its unique approach towards lockdown and shutdown measures. As part of post-COVID 19 recovery measures, the government focused on enhancing educational infrastructure, including internet access and digital tools targeted policies that aim to reduce dropout rates and increase retention,

especially for girls and other marginalized groups to ensure a more sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study compares enrolment in the pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. During and after the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, enrolment rates rose compared to the pre-COVID-19 period in both public and private schools. Specifically, more girls than boys were enrolled in both Dar es salaam and Dodoma regions. This increase in girls' enrolment may be attributed to the awareness-raising activities done by State and Non-State Actors in recent years on empowering girls and women such as **HakiElimu** and **Tanzania Women Fund**.

Given the findings of this study, we recommend that the government and the private sector should invest in digital infrastructure, especially in primary schools that are situated in rural areas, to ensure children and teachers coming from low-income households in rural councils access high-speed internet and affordable digital devices for learning and teaching. In this case, the government can partner with telecommunications companies and Non-Governmental Organizations to fund and deliver digital education tools and, as a result, ensure equitable access to remote learning, benefiting students during disruptions and supporting digital literacy.

In addition, the government should implement and enforce policies that prioritize gender equity in education, ensuring equal access and retention for both boys and girls at all education levels. Gender-sensitive teaching methods and curricula should be promoted to break stereotypes and foster an inclusive learning environment.

Furthermore, the government, through the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Vocational. Training (MoEST) should conduct training for both students and teachers, especially in public schools, to improve their tech-savvy skills. The pandemic laid bare the existing challenges in the education sector in Tanzania. One of the challenges was the ability of both students and teachers to use the online platforms mostly in the rural public primary schools.

Finally, accurate data is critical for tracking progress and identifying gaps using educational tracking tools like BEMIS (Basic Education Management Information System) to monitor enrollment, dropout, and gender disparities in real-time. The central government should provide financial and technical resources for local governments to collect and analyze data effectively. Evidence-based policymaking will ensure targeted interventions that address specific challenges to poor-rich primary schools in urban-rural councils and gender dimensions.

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