The Republic of The Gambia

Education Sector Safe School Framework for Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Preface

Introduction

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic is a global health emergency that rippled into economic and social emergency. International trade and transport systems came to a halt. Many countries went into total or partial lockdown. As a results schools and educational institutions were closed for several weeks. As of April 2020, globally more than 1.58 billion children in 191 countries[1], are affected by the school closure. In West and Central Africa over 128 million children and youth are directly affected by nationwide school closures.

On 17 March 2020, The Gambia officially confirmed COVID-19 hitting the country. Subsequently, His Excellency the President declared a state of public health emergency with many other restrictions including the closure of all schools and educational institutions taking effect the following day. This led to more than 674,300 children in pre-primary to secondary schools and about 20,000 adolescents and youths attending higher, tertiary and non-formal education and training had their activities suspended.

During the school closure period the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education initiated a radio and television distance learning programme. The is to enable children stay at home to control the spread of the virus and at the same time provide them opportunity for continuity of learning. Radio and TV lessons started on 23 March 2020 and continues. The lessons were complemented with messages on positive behaviours on the prevention of the spread of COVID-19.

After more than two months of closure of schools and educational institutions, the Education Sector initiated discussions on **how** schools should reopen. The objective of this strategy is to put in place a timeless plan for school reopening. **When** schools and educational institution will open is decision to be made by the President guided by the best interest of the child and overall public health considerations, based on an assessment of the associated benefits and risks[2].

This Safe School Framework will propose several protocols, procedures and standards for practices and facilities. The framework will propose action require before, during and after schools reopen are adequately in place with robust monitoring. The frame is intended to make the operations of school safe. This will ensure continuity of learning and well-being for children and youth, especially those most vulnerable.
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Purpose of Safe School Framework

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of children around the world were not acquiring foundational, transferable and job specific skills. The UNICEF COVID -19 strategy observes that many more 5-year-olds were not on track to identify or name 10 letters of the alphabet and recognize numbers from 1 to 10; and much more 10-year-olds were not able to read a simple paragraph and do basic Maths. Similarly, many 18-year olds have not acquired literacy/numeracy, digital, transferable and job specific skills. Similar scenarios could be observed in The Gambia.

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[1] https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures
[2] https://www.unicef.org/media/68366/file/Framework-for-reopening-schools-2020.pdf

In The Gambia, the continued closure of schools could indeed be expected to compound the situation, with increased negative spill-over effects at different fronts within the education system.

1. The disparities observed within the education system between regions and the rich and poor will be exacerbated. The essential services (learning opportunities and school feeding) offered by the schools to deprived communities and under-privileged learners has been totally cut off.

2. The internal efficiency of the education system will be seriously affected. About 670,000 students that are currently kept at home would not be able to transit the next grade to the other creating an unprecedented educational resources student-year wastage. The education system may not be able to enrol G1 students for the 2021-2022 academic year. This situation will have a high economic and social cost for the entire country.

3. The continued closure of schools has created an unprecedented demand for distance learning education. However, considering the challenges in establishing and maintaining the TV and Radio learning programmes to move the classroom and the entire school at home is potentially viable but not financially sustainable.

4. It is also observed that there might be risk of increased child violence and child labor in the absence of the protective nature of schools. Children, particularly the girl child may be put under intensive pressure for early marriage.

5. The situation will create enormous difficulties to validate learning with fairness. The system will be left with no objective criteria to determine admission to higher grade and transition from one level to the other.

Considering the above, it is imperative that the education system works on modalities to open schools safely to ensure the continuity of learning. The primary purpose of this Safe School Framework is to:

- Provide children with adequate information to protect them from COVID-19 infection at home or in school.
- Ensure that learning environments are safe and protected from COVID-19 infection according to standard guidelines.
- Empower and protect all children, especially those infected or with an infected family member, from discrimination due to stigmatization.
- Ensure and sustain continuity of learning using multiple channels and platforms to provide for the specific needs of every child.
- Strengthen the participation of community members, education authorities and children in a collaborative manner.

Guiding Principles for Implementing Safe School Standards

- A *Rights-Based Approach*: Action should be guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the best interests of the child. Non-discriminatory and all-inclusive provision of education underlining gender equity and targeting of the poor and the disadvantaged groups
- *Continuity*: Safe education should be made available at all stages, starting at the emergency phase and continuing up to and during the implementation of durable solutions. This applies to both formal and non-formal education at all levels.

- *Community Participation*: Safety actions to stop or control the spread of COVID-19 in schools should be defined, monitored and evaluated with the cooperation of school administrators including board of governors, education authorities, parent-teacher associations and students.
- *Partnerships*: The support of the MDAs such as MoH, MoFEA, MoWCSW, MoI and Local Government Authorities. In addition to partnerships with the community, alliances with the Local Education Group (LEG)should be encouraged to coordinate efforts to make learning environments secure.

Section 2: School Safety Protocols

Safe reopening of schools and educational institution require proper planning, and enforcement of guidelines. This framework adopted a phased approach to the reopening of schools. In Phase 1 focus will be what needs to be done prior to reopening. In Phase 2 it describes what happens when schools just reopen and in Phase 3 it is about building systems for resilience.

Key overarching considerations for the reopening of school and educational institutions will include the following:
- *Policy and administrative environment*: This will require the review of existing school policy guidelines relating to COVID-19 and development of new ones. School leaders need to be COVID-19 responsive by putting in place administrative measures to prevent its spread.
- *Safe learning spaces and facilities*: All learning spaces should attain the minimum standards of hygiene and sanitation. This will require cleaning and disinfecting classrooms, toilets and water points before reopening of schools; regular provision of WASH supplies; and psychosocial support for children especially those infected or affected directly by COVID-19.
- *Continuity of learning*: During COVID-19 school closure distance learning through radio and television was the main channel of continuity of learning. Reopening schools means resumption of classroom-based learning. However catch-up learning programmes will be implemented supported with printed learning materials; teachers will be trained and mobilized to support; vigorous use of technology-based delivery of curriculum will be pursued; and special focus on vulnerable groups in catch-up learning programmes.
- *Community Engagement*: Building community capacity to be resilient; leading actions to make their schools safe; participate in planning, implementation and monitoring of activities; behaviour chance; social protection schemes including cash transfers.

Reason for Opening schools

- Minimize loss of instructional hours
- No timeline for the complete eradication of COVID-19, thus need to act
- Avoid spill over as a result of loss of academic year
- Children's right to education will be at risk
- Children exposed to abuse and exploitation for not being in school
- Vulnerable children are likely to permanently dropout from school

- School-based services to be accessible to needy children
- Investment in education either underutilized or wasted
- The distance learning modes and curriculum coverage is limited.

Unknown Facts about COVID-19

- Who is infected amongst teachers, children and other interest groups?
- Inadequate knowledge about the transmission dynamic between children and adults or even amongst children
- The magnitude and impact of school closure on the education budget
- The magnitude and impact of school closure on learning outcomes
- Parents' willingness to allow children back to school
- The magnitude of the constraints faced by private education service providers

Before opening schools:

Due to the highly contagious nature of COVID-19, school reopening should be well planned by putting in place adequate risk mitigation measures. These should include updating critical operation guidance and procedure, and financing plans needed to improve continuity of learning. Specific focus should be safe operations, including strengthening remote learning practices. The following critical actions are required:

- Development of school reopening plan which can be in phases based on data available from the Health Sector.
- Building partnership with MoFEA for the needed resources
- Building partnership with MoH for the daily testing to happen by training teachers and community health nurses providing field supervision and support
- Fumigation and cleaning of classrooms and toilets to reduce any risk through surface contamination.
- Treatment of water points to be functional and safe
- Operational and adequate guidelines for school transport service, food vendors and other service providers

During School Reopening:

After children being absent from school for several weeks and months under a very stressful consideration, reopening may require a lot of adaptation and recovery process. Psycho-social support mechanisms need to be in place to integrate vulnerable and marginalized children from dropping out of school. Remedial lessons should be started to regain the lost instructional time and communities need to be better engaged to enable quick return to normalcy. The follow actions are required:

- Maintain a practice of daily temperature testing and record keeping of each child and teacher. Designated teachers as First Point of Call focal points in each school, Cluster, and RED and train them on temperature testing and recording;
- Continuous community engagement and sensitization on COVID-19 advisory to prevent reoccurrence of the virus;
- Strengthen handwashing practices by providing basic facilities and supplies. School should be encouraged to use local available materials so that cost will not be a barrier in the future;

- Ensure class sizes conform to social distancing guidelines;
- Ensure schools conform to social distancing guidelines during sports, recreational and all group activities whether in open or close spaces;
- School support staff such as caretakers, watchpersons, SMC and food vendors will be given some orientation and support;
- Consider a phased opening of schools taking into consideration data and advice from the Health Sector, examination class requirements and transition classes. The following phases could be considered:
  - ✔ *Phase 1*: Grade 9 students will be the first to reopen (June) to allow them enough time to prepare for their examination (July/August). This being a critical transition class, delaying their exams will affect the enrolment and promotion at all the levels. Subsequently Grade 12 will reopen. Grade 12 is an exiting/end cycle class having to sit to an international examination;
  - ✔ *Phase 2*: Based on Health Sector advisory and permission from the Executive the rest of the classes will return to school (August). Some of the measures that will be put in place are- an extended school week (Monday – Saturday); Grade levels to attend on alternate days (2 days a week with home assignments); and shorter holidays in the 2020/2021 academic year;
  - ✔ *Phase 3*: This is normalcy returns and schools are fully functioning with limited restriction (Sept/October). Focus will be on resilience building; management of the flexible school calendar; strengthening remedial classes; strengthen homework assignments; greater engagement of communities and parents; and strengthen of the distance learning programme.

After Schools Reopened:

The actively monitor health indicators will continue, psycho-social support for children and teachers will be expanded focusing on wellbeing and protection. Strengthen pedagogy, adapt remote education for blended teaching and learning, including knowledge on infection transmission and prevention.
- All COVID-19 preventive behaviours will be strengthened for both teachers and children
- Improvement of classroom ventilation especially in old buildings
- Improve access to distance learning through solar power and provision of radio and TV sets.
- Policies and guidelines covering the establishment of health committees in schools and combating stigmatization and the provision of psychosocial support

Section 3: Inter-sectoral Collaboration

Partner	Responsibilities
Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE)	- Develop a safe school framework - Engage partners for the implementation of the strategy - Engage the National Assembly and the Executive on the school reopening - Orientation of the general public on the framework

Regional Education Directorate (RED)	● Supervise the implementation of the safe school framework and provide progress report ● Coordinate and facilitate the transportation of teachers to their various schools ● Facilitate teacher posting and redeployment to meet teacher requirement
Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs (MoFEA)	● Provision of timely budgetary support for the implementation of the safe school framework ● Provide technical support
Ministry of Higher Education Research Science and Technology (MoHERST)	● Support the re-orientation of teacher training curriculum delivery
Ministry of Health	● Provision of technical and advisory support for the implementation of the safe school framework ● Train teachers on temperature testing and handling of suspected cases of Covid-19 ● Support the provision of PPE and temperature testing equipment ● Support the fumigation and disinfection of schools
Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare	● Provide the delivery of psychosocial support to children in schools ● Support the sensitization of communities on safe school framework
UN Agencies	● Support the development of the safe school framework ● Support resource mobilization efforts ● Provide technical assistance for the implementation of the safe school framework
Civil Society Organizations (GTU, EFANET,etc)	● Support the development of the safe school framework ● Support the sensitization of teachers and school managers on the framework
Private Sector and Diaspora	● Support the resource mobilization efforts ● Provide technical assistance ● Provide affordable services (internet, airtime etc)
School heads and teachers	● Ensure the effective implementation of the safe school framework ● Timely provision of progress reports
Community members	● Support and active participation for the implementation of the safe school framework

Section 4: Monitoring and Data

Education Sector Safe School Framework Strategic Actions and Results Framework

Key Strategies	Expected Results	Activities	Indicators	Targ
1. Communication	1.1 All children, teachers and parents acquire awareness of and are participating and supporting the safe school framework and the timely opening of schools in phases	1.1.1 Development of the reopening plans of schools in phases	School reopening plan developed	1
		1.1.1.1 Dissemination of key messages through electronic media	Number of press releases aired through radios and tv	7 days
		1.1.1.2 Printing and distribution of key messages on safe school framework	Number of posters and flyers printed and distributed	1000
		1.1.1.3 Panel Discussions on Radio and TV to create awareness on the Education Sector Safe School Framework	Number of panel discussions held	15
		1.1.1.4 Use drama and poetry to communicate to the communities on the safe school framework	Number of dramas and poetries developed and aired	6
2. Ensure Continuity of Learning	2. All learning environment and facilities are safe for the resumption and continuity of teaching and learning.	2.1.1 Keep learning environment safe for teaching and learning to continue	Number of schools certified safe for teaching and learning by MoH	1500
		2.1.1.1 Fumigate Learning Environments - school compounds and classrooms	Number of schools fumigated	1530
		2.1.1.2 Treat water sources and toilet facilities in schools	Number of schools with water sources and toilet facilities treated	1530
		2.1.1.3 Provide sanitary facilities and supplies for schools	Number of schools supplied with sanitary facilities	1530
		2.1.1.4 Refurbish and maintain existing facilities (classrooms, toilets, water points) to meet minimum hygiene standards	Number of schools refurbished	200
		2.1.1.5 Provide PPE for all schools	Number of schools supplied with PPE	1530