

RapidLearn: Real Time Assessment of Primary Students' Distant Learning and Family Wellbeing during COVID19 in Mozambique

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Thematic importance: Designed and conducted at the peak of Covid-19 pandemic, the RapidLearn study highlights the importance of research adaptation and innovation in response to new global conditions and policy demands for real time monitoring of child well-being.

Introduction and objectives: The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has had a significant impact on children's access to learning and outcomes globally, but had even more detrimental effects in poor countries. In Mozambique all schools were closed on 23 March 2020. The Ministry of Education and Human Development (MINEDH) provided distant learning guidelines to ensure that students continued to have access to some form of learning. However, the different stakeholders – parents/caregivers, teachers, school managers and community leaders – were not prepared to implement MINEDH's measures or to deal with the consequences of the pandemic on the provision of education. The Rapid Learn Telephone Survey was designed and conducted within a very short time to gather empirical evidence on the effect of the pandemic on children's learning and well-being. The study objectives were to: (i) assess the immediate socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on families of primary school children; (ii) learn about the material pressures experienced by families and their perceptions of change since the school closure; (iii) understand how the closure of schools affects ongoing learning of boys and girls; (iv) learn about caregivers' expectations regarding whether the child will return to school.

Method: The Rapid Learn Telephone Survey was conducted from August to September 2020 across all provinces of Mozambique. Drawing on the 2019 sample of students from grade 1 of 7 of the Longitudinal Assessment of School Dropout (ALDE), the survey utilized a sub-sample of 2,289 caregivers with available telephone numbers. This resulted in 1,644 completed interviews with caregivers, a response rate of about 71 per cent. It was designed as mixed method study with qualitative open-ended questions complementing the structured survey instruments.

Qualitative and quantitative data were analysed independently and triangulated.

Results:

(i) Shocks and coping strategies: The survey found that the COVID-19 pandemic had caused shocks in the form of disruptions in family income and food insecurity for most of the sampled households undermining children's participation in distance learning. Close to two thirds of respondents declared food insecurity. Job loses were particularly prevalent in the South of the country (more urban areas). The most commonly reported coping strategy was engaging in additional income-generating activities followed by reducing consumption.

(ii) Children's engagement in distant learning: Interviews with caregivers indicated that 60 per cent of children were engaged in some type of study activity during the school closure. Yet, qualitative findings from interviews with school directors and district authorities show a very limited access to, and use of, learning materials and resources. One of three children (33 per cent) who did not study at all during the school closure reallocated learning time to other domestic activities. One quarter of all caregivers indicated lack of support from teachers and limited access to teaching materials.

Conclusions and implications: The survey was designed in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education. It aimed to serve specific policy monitoring purpose to inform vital decisions on

distant learning at the time when situation changed monthly. Results highlighted the need for integrated and multi-sectorial approach. Alongside measures to strengthen communication channels between schools and caregivers (education), the study underscored the need to improve food security and provide nutritional support to most vulnerable families (social protection, health sectors). A set of recommendations were shared with national and international community within three weeks after completion of the survey. This helped to stimulate a public debate advocating for school reopening.