



SAFE SCHOOLS OPENING POSITION PAPER.

BACKGROUND

The year 2020 redefined society in a huge way because of the novel Corona Virus. The education sector was severely affected by this pandemic not just in Zimbabwe but globally. The Zimbabwean education sector was heavily impacted by the Covid-19 induced lockdown. Our education sector was hard hit because prior to Covid-19 it had its own already existing challenges due to years of neglect.

A February 2021 OCHA Zimbabwe Cluster status on Education¹ notes that the education system in Zimbabwe was already stretched before the Covid19 pandemic because of multiple crises that included the chronic economic crisis, humanitarian crisis (Cyclone Idai and food insecurity) as well as continuous job actions and demonstrations by teachers over poor salaries. According to UNICEF² only a third of schools in Zimbabwe are in good condition, access to quality public education remains a challenge due to physical closure of schools and the Zimbabwe education remain has become largely privatized. serves as an indicator of how the quality of education has fallen.

The Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) gave a directive on the physical closure of schools as part of a national Covid-19 induced lockdown on 24 March 2020. Schools suffered a 6 month closure and learners lost out on valuable learning time in 2020. The conversation now became about how students would continue with learning in their homes and several alternative ways of learning were introduced such as online learning and broadcast media. However, only those privileged enough and well-resourced to be in private schools managed to quickly adapt through online learning platforms whereas public schools remained on a complete shutdown.

Schools officially opened on 28 September 2020 in a phased approach beginning with exam classes because of the need to decongest schools especially in public schools where infrastructure is limited and the teacher per student ratio is high. This decision was arrived at without adequate wider consultation as recommended by the UNICEF framework for safe re-opening of schools that advocates for multisectoral consultations. This led to unintended consequences such as teacher absenteeism. Learning did not take place during this time as teachers were incapacitated to travel to their respective schools. At the time of writing this policy analysis, teachers are receiving a monthly salary of ZWL17 000 at a time when the Total Consumption Poverty Level, TCPL for an individual stands at ZWL4, 987,00 per month

¹ <https://www.unocha.org/southern-and-eastern-africa-rosea/zimbabwe>

² <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/zimbabwe>

according to the ZimStats January 2021 report. For an average family of six this translates to ZWL29, 922, 00 per month. Teachers are therefore living in abject poverty

The Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, ARTUZ launched a Covid-19 monitoring platform where teachers would report on the preparedness of their schools in receiving students and school staff back into schools, a total of 20 education districts participated in the survey. Two districts were picked from each of the ten administration districts. A total of twenty schools participated per district. The average compliance to government set Standard Operating Procedures, SOPs stood at 30 per cent.

As the schools are at the verge of re-opening as per the government's announcement on the 2nd of March 2021, what remains important is to ensure that key issues highlighted above are dealt with head on so that we avoid the errors of 2020 as explained above.

ARTUZ, consulted teacher unions, students' unions, schools development associations and the passengers association of Zimbabwe and came up with the following findings.

SAFE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

UNESCO describes the education sector as the hardest hit sector globally by the Corona Virus as it has derailed efforts to attain and achieve SDG4. The reopening of schools requires meticulous planning and implementation of internationally and nationally identified safety guidelines and protocols.

The UNICEF Framework for reopening of schools emphasises that timing must be learner centred and be a consultative process with key stakeholders. It also speaks to six key dimensions that should be used to assess their state of readiness and inform planning. These key dimensions are policy, financing, safe operations, learning, reaching the most marginalized and wellbeing/protection³.

Zimbabwe also developed a COVID-19 strategy and Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs). These procedures include:

- the provision of infection prevention and control of safe schools,
- learner, teacher and staff welfare, and

⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Framework-for-reopening-schools-2020.pdf>

- psychosocial support,

Under the back to school and opening better priority.⁴

ARTUZ had a national platform to monitor school adherence to government set SoPs. The monitoring program revealed that the average compliance to SoPs in public schools was at 30 percent. Schools failed to adhere to basic precautionary measures such as, fumigation of all school buildings, testing of learners and school staff, decongestion of classes and hostels, sanitizing and wearing of face masks, and this was part of what triggered the second wave of Covid19 in Zimbabwe, as schools were at one point responsible for the majority of the infections in the country. Over 500 learners officially tested positive and schools like John Tallach were forced to close, the government was forced to backtrack on their decision to open schools.

EDUCATOR'S PREPAREDNESS

Teachers under the body of ARTUZ declared incapacitation out of several serious factors that were visibly evident two decades ago and are even more pronounced currently, and this is acknowledged by other teachers' unions within the country⁵. The effects of high inflation which started in 2001 and reached peak in 2008 gravely eroded teacher salaries and had adverse effects on their standards of living. In 2012 the government and civil servants held salary negotiations and the minimum salary of a teacher was pegged at USD500⁶, after a petition to the President which asked for a review of salaries to USD538⁷, which was not enough to meet the basic needs of a teacher and below the SADC average of USD600⁸. The teachers accepted

⁴ Zimbabwean Education Cluster COVID Strategy

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/zimbabwe_education_cluster_covid_strategy_12.05.2020_final.pdf

⁵ Education International - Zimbabwe: Government must pay teachers decent salaries for them to resume work <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/detail/16996/zimbabwe-government-must-pay-teachers-decent-salaries-for-them-to-resume-work>

⁷<https://www.herald.co.zw/govt-civil-servants-sign-salary-deal/>

⁷ Civil servants petition President <https://www.herald.co.zw/civil-servants-petition-president/>

⁸ https://www.rtei.org/documents/306/Zim_teachers_among_lowest_paid_in_the_region.html

the offer for the sake of progress and the need to patriotically serve their nation. That Zimbabwe's wage structure falls below the acceptable international benchmarks is confirmed in a USAID Strategic Economic Research Analysis⁹.

Rural teachers are more affected as compared to their urban counterparts due to several factors characterized by the environment in which they are teaching¹⁰. They cannot afford to go back to their teaching posts which are at most times not suitable for human habitation as there is no running water or electricity in most of the schools and they are hardly in no condition to sustain their families under a combination of their economic circumstances and living environment.

ARTUZ has joined hands with six other Sister Unions under the Federation of Zimbabwe Educators Union, FOZEU, to collectively demand restoration of the value of the October 2018 salaries and call for broad based all stakeholder salary negotiations that are in the spirit of true labour justice and respect of teacher dignity. Teachers should be capacitated to return back to schools with constant reviews in line with the inflationary economic environment in the country.

LEARNER PREPAREDNESS - *accessibility, availability, affordability, acceptability, and safety of education*

For the physical opening of schools and learning to take form, the preparedness of learners needs to be considered. The physical, social, and mental health and well-being of learners' attributes to vital elements of a functional school system. In 2020 the government hastened the opening of schools without having done a proper evaluation on how to fit the students in the school framework after being away from school for months. A spike in COVID-19 cases in schools during the month of November and December 2020. This had a negative impact on the learners, particularly the examination classes as this meant those that tested positive had to go under isolation hence interrupting the writing process.

⁹ USAID Strategic Economic Research and Analysis – Zimbabwe (SERA)
https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/---ro-abidjan/---sro-harare/documents/genericdocument/wcms_470742.pdf

¹⁰ Education conditions in rural Zimbabwe challenge teachers <https://anabaptistworld.org/education-conditions-in-rural-zimbabwe-challenge-teachers/>

It is undeniable that 2020 was not a productive year for most students. The alternative learning measures such as e-learning and broadcast lessons did not cater for most learners, particularly those in rural settings. This is due to the factors such as, a lack of a remote learning policy framework, limited access to and prohibitive costs of data, lack of gadgets to use to conduct those online lessons, and no electricity. These factors can also be attributed to the 9% drop in 2020 grade seven results.

The students' frame of mind after being away from the school system after such a long time is the most important factor to take into consideration. Research carried out by the ARTUZ, (Education in Crisis Report), ¹¹has shown that a high number of students in rural and urban areas are seriously engaging in drug abuse and taking in of some highly toxic and illicit substances. According to the Zimbabwe Situation Report (February 2020), prolonged school closure increased vulnerabilities amongst learners, more so, for girls, children with disabilities, and those living in poverty. The risk of teenage pregnancies, sexual exploitation, child marriages, abuse, violence, mental health issues, and other threats to their well-being were increased.

To achieve maximum learner preparedness, a school internal counselling platform needs to be set up in all schools with the support of the schools' psychological services. COVID-19 has negatively impacted the country's economy, as well as the livelihoods of most households, resulting in school fees being beyond the reach of many. Financial aid needs to be granted to the vulnerable families to help cushion them from shocks caused by the pandemics and enable them to send their children to school.

In urban areas, there is a crisis of public transport for the commuting public. The Passenger Association of Zimbabwe, PAZ informed ARTUZ in an oral interview that the average waiting time for public transport is 30 minutes and the buses are overcrowded risking super spreading of COVID19. Government should urgently allow private transport operators to resume operations to compliment the services rendered by the state operated ZUPCO buses. This will serve to reduce waiting time for commuters and decongest the buses for the benefit of learners and teachers who commute. Zimbabwe faces an acute shortage of public transportation especially in urban areas where private players in the transportation industry have been barred by the government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) to operate if they are not registered with the ZUPCO

¹¹ <http://kubatana.net/2020/09/23/artuz-publication-education-in-crisis-report/>

company and this has put a strain on the public bus operator which has a depleted fleet hence the coming in of private players will lessen this problem as long and winding queues are now the order of the day with a high number of people face delays in reaching their destinations.

Conclusion.

Zimbabwe's schools are not ready for effective and safe opening. Challenges of teacher preparedness to teach, learners' preparedness to learn and safety in face of COVID19 must be addressed before schools can be reopened.

Recommendations

1. Government to make long term investments in the teaching profession. This includes ensuring fair remuneration, continuous professional development, and general welfare of teachers. Government to convene a multi stakeholder consultation for school reopening.
2. Government to make long term investment to support reopening of schools, that includes equipping all schools with preventative measures, support vaccination of willing adults, and producing a feasible and supported remote learning policy framework to compliment physical learning.
3. Government to adopt a realistic grade transition plan and adjustment of public examinations calendar.
4. Operationalization of psychosocial support mechanisms for learners, teachers, and education workers.
5. Education authorities should strengthen communication mechanisms that promote dialogue and engagement with teachers to mitigate against teacher attrition and promote wellbeing. Government to ensure continuity of learning for all children in ways that are safe, appropriate, and accessible.
6. Government to increase efforts in the operationalization of the COVID Strategy to mitigate and remedy the negative effects of school closures.
7. Government to provide flexible learning approaches, so that marginalized children are not deterred from returning to school when they re-open.