



Herring, E., Campbell, P., Elmi, M., Ismail, L., McNeill, S., Rubac, A., Ali, A., Saeed, A., & Shidane, M. (2020). COVID-19 Responses and Education in Somalia/Somaliland. *Sociology Mind*, 10(4), 200-221. <https://doi.org/10.4236/sm.2020.104013>

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COVID-19 Responses and Education in Somalia/Somaliland

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How to cite this paper: Herring, E., Campbell, P., Elmi, M., Ismail, L., McNeill, S., Rubac, A., Ali, A. S., Saed, A., & Shidane, M. (2020). COVID-19 Responses and Education in Somalia/Somaliland. *Sociology Mind*, 10, 200-221.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/sm.2020.104013>

Received: August 27, 2020

Accepted: October 17, 2020

Published: October 20, 2020

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Abstract

The research explored the educational and broader social impacts of COVID-19 control measures and efforts to compensate for those measures in the education sector (e.g. by online teaching) in Somalia/Somaliland. It did so through 131 interviews and four focus group discussions with forty government educational officials, educators and the public with a wide range of educational experiences, including no education ever. Positive views of the general availability and quality of education were based on comparisons with the past period of civil war and state collapse. Nearly all participants agreed that education had been harmed severely by COVID-19 control measures. They also tended to agree the educational inequalities that disadvantaged girls, the poor and rural populations had been exacerbated by COVID-19 control measures and by education provision to compensate for educational institution closures. Building back better in education as a response to COVID-19 is not happening when looked at overall, as even the positive efforts, while laudable in themselves, are exacerbating inequalities. The findings were similar for both locations. The research highlights the need and potential support for a more inclusive approach to responding to COVID-19 in the education sector.

Keywords

COVID-19, Education, Somalia, Somaliland

1. Introduction

As part of attempts to control COVID-19, government authorities in Mogadishu (capital of Somalia) and Hargeisa (capital of Somaliland—self-declared inde-

pendent from Somalia and autonomous since 1991 but internationally unrecognised) imposed widespread closures of educational institutions in March 2020, with partial reopening for examinations in Somaliland in June and Somalia in July. The authorities and others also introduced education measures aimed at compensating for the closures. The purpose of this article is to explore the educational and broader social impacts of those COVID-19 control and compensatory measures from the perspective of government educational officials, educators and citizens with a wide range of educational experiences (including no education ever) in the Mogadishu and Hargeisa areas. The topic is significant, as educational institution closures and compensatory measures such as online classes have been used not only in Somalia/Somaliland but globally as COVID-19 response measures. It is important to understand whether those measures aimed at compensating for closures do indeed compensate, whether they compensate only for the more privileged (such as those with computers and smartphones) and increase inequality, and what are their wider social consequences. This understanding can form the basis of better policy in a range of spheres to produce a more optimal response to controlling COVID-19.

There is a burgeoning scholarly literature on COVID-19 and education in relation to controlling COVID-19, the educational and other social impacts of educational institution closures, and tools such as online classes to continue teaching and learning (e.g. [Viner et al., 2020](#); [Crawford et al., 2020](#)). However, this article is the first scholarly research on these issues in relation to Somalia/Somaliland; the only other materials currently available are brief news items or commentaries or some official planning documents or proposals (e.g. [MoECHE FRS, 2020](#); [MoEHE PSS, 2020](#); [MoES RoS, 2020](#)) and a recent report that provides an overview of education in Somalia but which did not mention COVID-19 ([Abdulahi et al., 2020](#)). Some of the more general literature usefully emphasizes the need to consider equity and to embed the response in a longer-term commitment to building back better in the education system (e.g. [Vu & Savonitto, 2020](#); [UN, 2020](#)). We endorse this perspective in principle but for much of the world there is a fundamental problem of lack of resources: as a result, in the case of Somalia/Somaliland, the education system never reaches most of the population, who are illiterate ([Herring et al., 2020b](#)). Lack of access to remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic is a problem in most countries ([UNICEF, 2020](#)). For most of the population of Somalia/Somaliland the deeper problem is not that they could not continue learning during the pandemic; it is that they had no access to education at all before it anyway ([Herring et al., 2020b](#)).

The research produced five main findings. First, views of the availability and quality of education among those interviewed were surprisingly positive given the fact of low levels of availability and quality; these relatively positive views were based on comparisons with the past period of civil war and state collapse. Second, there was consensus among participants that education had been harmed by COVID-19 control measures in the education sector and near consensus that the harm has been severe. Third, participants tended to agree that inequalities—

specifically those that disadvantage girls, rural populations, people on the lowest incomes, people without internet access or TV or even access to a radio and people below the level of Higher Education (HE)—have been exacerbated by those COVID-19 control and compensatory measures in the education sector. Fourth, the findings were similar in the Mogadishu and Hargeisa areas, with any differences being secondary. These findings highlight the need and potential support for a more inclusive approach to responding to COVID-19 in the education sector in Somalia/Somaliland.

2. Methods

The study was qualitative descriptive research which drew on 131 remote phone interviews and four remote phone focus group discussions with individuals from selected social groups supplemented with desk-based review of academic and grey literature as the basis of inductive thematic analysis. Ethics approval was obtained from the relevant academic authorities before participants were recruited or data collected. Health and safety in relation to COVID-19 was assured by use of remote (phone) methods only. Consent was obtained orally in line with Somali oral culture and to enable participation by illiterate people. Physical, social, cultural, political and psychological risks were managed through the extensive skills and experience of the Somali members of the research team who live and work in the locations studied. Participants are identified only by location, participant number (e.g. P15) and either extent of education or role as an educator or government official.

The forty participants were equal numbers of adult male and female Somalia/Somaliland citizens resident in the Mogadishu area of Somalia (P1-P20) and the Hargeisa area of Somaliland (P21-P40), with twenty in each location. The sample of participants roughly approximated that of the population as a whole, in terms of urban-rural-nomadic mix and in terms of where government officials and educators tend to reside. The government officials and educators were almost exclusively urban, while the remaining participants were roughly 50% urban, 25% rural and 25% nomadic pastoralist. For each geographic area, we recruited five educators and five government education officials—one each for primary school, secondary school, Alternative Basic Education/Non-Formal Education (ABE/NFE), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and HE. The purpose of this was to ensure that we had representation from the full range of categories of education. We also recruited participants with no formal education ever, some/completed primary school, some/completed secondary school, some/completed ABE/NFE, some/completed TVET and some/completed HE. The purpose here was to ensure that we had representation among the participants of the full range of amounts of formal education (including none ever). For rural residents and nomadic pastoralists, we recruited participants with no formal education ever and some/completed primary school; we did so because illiteracy is around 90% among this section of the population. In the population overall, around half have never had any formal education, and illiteracy is about

90% for nomadic pastoralists, 70% for rural communities and IDPs, and 35% for non-IDP urban dwellers (Herring et al., 2020b: p. 2).

Participation by some of the most marginalized people was enabled with only a basic (non-smart) phone and with no requirement for literacy. The team read out or summarized verbally any written materials and put participants with basic phones on speaker for focus group discussions. The research team was also able to conduct interviews and focus group discussions in the Somali Maay dialect or Arabic as well as Somali and English, as preferred by the participant. In the cases of those who did not want to take part in a focus group discussion we conducted an additional interview instead. Every participant was paid \$25 for each interview so that poverty was not a barrier to participation and to communicate in a material way that we valued their time and energy.

The interviews and focus group discussions took place in July and August 2020. The sessions were semi-structured so that we could explore the themes we had identified and allow participants to introduce material on their own initiative. The main purpose of the third round of interviews was to check and understand in more depth the preliminary findings from the first two rounds.

We audio recorded the interviews and focus group discussions and then transcribed quotes relevant to our themes and translated them into English where necessary (most cases). The discussion below includes illustrative quotes: these quotes are valuable not only as evidence to support points we make in the analysis but also to communicate the interpretive nuance that is lost in aggregate analysis. Where we offered choices between qualitative evaluations, we converted these into quantitative scores and tabulated them for ease of summary and analysis; the numbers in the tables indicate the percentage of responses for the twenty participants for that location.

3. Views of the Availability and Quality of Education

3.1. Availability

We asked participants “Which of the following is closest to your view of the overall availability of education in Somalia/Somaliland?” (Table 1 & Table 2).

Table 1. Availability of education—Mogadishu.

| Which of the following is closest to your view of the overall availability of education in Somalia/Somaliland? | | | | | |
|--|-------------|-----------------------|------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| Excellent | Fairly good | Neither good nor poor | Quite poor | Very poor | Don't know/ no answer |
| 25% | 55% | 10% | 5% | 5% | 0% |

80% of Mogadishu participants responded positively on the availability of education. However, educational institutions are usually private and require payment of fees to attend:

Schools, especially the privately-owned schools, are available everywhere in

our country. Anyone who has access to money can also access education in Somalia. The public schools are limited though. (P20—Some/completed primary school nomadic pastoralist)

One participant also made the point that information is not easily available about the provision that does exist:

Education is available in Somalia, but there are challenges regarding financing and awareness which make it less accessible. (P17—No formal education ever rural resident)

The high financial cost of access to education was reported by diverse participants, with answers emphasizing how financially unrealistic it is for many families to enroll their children:

It is available, but it is not affordable. Access to schools is low; although schools are available everywhere, they cannot afford it. About 15% of school age children in Somalia don't go to school. (P5—Government education official responsible for HE)

The point about limited access was driven home by a participant with reference to low levels of access even at school age:

Access to education is very low in Somalia. Very few school age children go to schools; that tells you availability and also access to education in Somalia is very low. (P10—HE educator)

Some Mogadishu participants reported that education is not available in rural areas and that TVET is not usually provided:

Not everybody can access education in Somalia. Furthermore, employment levels are low in our country while public education is limited. Private education is also expensive. In rural areas, education doesn't exist. (P16—Some/completed HE urban resident)

Education is widely available in Somalia. But schools for special learning, technical education and other skills are still absent. (P8—ABE/NFE educator)

Table 2. Availability of education—Hargeisa.

| Which of the following is closest to your view of the overall availability of education in Somalia/Somaliland? | | | | | |
|--|-------------|-----------------------|------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| Excellent | Fairly good | Neither good nor poor | Quite poor | Very poor | Don't know/ no answer |
| 40% | 35% | 10% | 15% | 0% | 0% |

Similar to the pattern in Mogadishu, 75% of Hargeisa participants rated the availability of education as either “Excellent” or “Fairly good”. They explained their evaluation by stating that they were living in a country that is developing, whilst still recovering from the effects of civil war:

I would say it is a medium level as we are a growing and recovering country. (P34—Some/completed ABE/NFE urban resident, Hargeisa)

One participant recounted progress but also talked about the poor being left behind:

During the last ten years, the education of our country has been improving and developing. There are increased opportunities, but we still have issues of accessibility for the poorer families. (P35—Some/completed TVET urban resident, Hargeisa)

An education official emphasized the specific context of Somaliland and its independence (not internationally recognized) from Somalia:

The education of our country is excellent because it has been developing and improving since 1991 when we reclaimed our independence. Education has been growing for about 30 years. It is one of our country's leading developments. I am not saying everything is 100%, but we have good education which is growing and improving. (P25—Government education official responsible for HE)

Hargeisa participants, like those in Mogadishu, reported that poverty and living in rural areas were barriers to accessing education:

Those who live in urban areas have the possibility to enroll their children in schools, whether that is private or public. In contrast, those who live in rural areas or are nomads do not have such access. (P27—Secondary school educator, Hargeisa)

It is difficult for low-income families to enroll children because of their economic status. (P33—Some/completed secondary school urban resident, Hargeisa)

Overall, positive views of the general availability of education were based on comparisons with the past period of civil war and state collapse. When we explored further, major problems of access for rural communities and the poor emerged.

3.2. Quality

We asked participants “Which of the following is closest to your view of the overall quality of education in Somalia/Somaliland?” (Table 3 & Table 4).

Table 3. Quality of education—Mogadishu.

| Which of the following is closest to your view of the overall quality of education in Somalia/Somaliland? | | | | | |
|---|-------------|-----------------------|------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| Excellent | Fairly good | Neither good nor poor | Quite poor | Very poor | Don't know/ no answer |
| 10% | 35% | 25% | 25% | 5% | 0% |

45% of Mogadishu participants said they perceived the quality of education to be “Fairly good” or “Excellent” with 30% rating it “Quite poor” or “Very poor” and 25% “Neither good nor poor”. Participants who had some personal experience of education, whether as students, as teachers or both, reported that the curriculum is now a unified one in areas under Federal Government control, which they saw as beneficial to the quality of education:

The Ministry of Education is also doing its work. There are trained teachers in the education sector who contribute to the quality of the education. Now we have a unified curriculum throughout the country. But still, there is a long way to go. (P7—Secondary school educator)

Our curriculum is now better than before. There are more teachers available in the schools and everywhere. (P13—Some/completed secondary school urban resident)

Mainly, the teachers are well educated. The Ministry of Education is also doing its job fantastically. There is one unified curriculum for the whole country. (P20—Some/completed primary school nomadic pastoralist)

One urban resident who had never had any formal education thought that the quality of the education was high enough to help people to get good jobs:

I believe that education in Somalia is of a good quality because people who learn and graduate from schools are good and have good jobs. (P11—No formal education ever urban resident)

Some Mogadishu participants voiced concerns about the lack of regulation and accountability of the education sector and about the proliferation of privately-run, profit-driven schools that do not have quality as a priority:

The number of schools and universities in Somalia is very large. There is no system that regulates them. That reduces the overall quality of education in Somalia. (P19—No formal education ever nomadic pastoralist)

Educational systems and standards that assure quality in our country are absent. Moreover, most of the educational centers in our country are open for business purposes which diminishes the quality. (P16—Some/completed HE urban resident)

A primary school educator contradicted the positive view of some others about the quality of the teachers, as well as voicing other criticisms:

The educators are not experienced. They are not well educated. They lack skills and the capacity to serve. Quality assurance is also absent. The curriculum used in our education sector is also weak, although it is better than before. (P6—Primary school educator)

A TVET educator reported having the view that education quality in Somalia did not match up to the rest of the region:

I work in a TVET school and, compared to neighboring countries, we are

far behind them in quality. There is still long way to go. Even for formal education, the quality of education is somewhat poor. (P9—TVET educator)

Table 4. Quality of education—Hargeisa.

| Which of the following is closest to your view of the overall quality of education in Somalia/Somaliland? | | | | | |
|---|-------------|-----------------------|------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| Excellent | Fairly good | Neither good nor poor | Quite poor | Very poor | Don't know/ no answer |
| 10% | 65% | 10% | 15% | 0% | 0% |

The Hargeisa participants also had a mainly positive perception of the quality of education though more so than those in Mogadishu, with 75% of participants rating it “Excellent” or “Fairly good”, and no participants describing it as “Very poor”. Even so, 25% of Hargeisa participants expressed the view that the quality of education in their area was “Neither good nor poor” or “Quite poor”. A key argument made to support the view that the quality of education in the Hargeisa area is good was the same one made with regard to the availability of education, i.e. that the education sector is operating in a difficult environment and the quality is improving:

There is a Ministerial effort for improving education quality, by maintaining teacher training programmes. Yes, still there is a great need to train teachers but systematically we are a country that has been improving its educational system at all levels—national, regional, and district levels. This contributes to standardizing the educational system thoroughly which is going on across the country still. (P23—Government education official responsible for ABE/NFE)

It is fairly good because we have a lot of people who are learning, finishing and graduating from schools and universities across the country. (P39—No formal education ever nomadic pastoralist)

Some Hargeisa participants were critical when commenting on lack of regulation, training and resources in the education system:

A language teacher or a science teacher may not be trained at all. I have seen many irregular things in our education industry. (P27—Secondary school educator)

It is quite poor. There are factors for this reasoning; the qualification of teachers at primary as well as secondary levels is low, under payment, lack of motivation, lack of training at Ministerial, regional and school levels, and a poor unified curriculum. These are key factors for experiencing poor education in our country, Somaliland. (P24—Government education official responsible for TVET)

In this section, a similar pattern emerged to that in the previous one of positive evaluations of the overall quality of education due to appreciation of progress

made being countered with strong reservations over weak regulation, under-resourcing, patchy training and dominance of the profit motive.

4. Impacts of Education Sector Responses to COVID-19

4.1. Extent of Harm to Education

We asked participants “How much harm has COVID-19 and responses to it done to education in Somalia/Somaliland?” (Table 5 & Table 6). Although the question asked about the impact of COVID-19 as well as the impact of responses to COVID-19, as illness and death due to the disease itself have been relatively low in Somalia/Somaliland with 93 confirmed COVID-19 deaths as of 25 August 2020 (Worldometer, 2020), participants focused wholly on the impact of measures to control the disease.

Table 5. Impact of COVID-19 and responses to it on education—Mogadishu.

| How much harm has COVID-19 and responses to it done to education in Somalia/Somaliland? | | | |
|---|---------------|---------|----------------------|
| A lot of harm | A little harm | No harm | Don't know/no answer |
| 95% | 5% | 0% | 0% |

95% of Mogadishu participants stated “A lot of harm” had been caused to education and the one remaining participant opted for saying “A little harm” had been caused. Many focused on the closure of educational institutions and there was concern that some private institutions would lose so much income that they would not be able to reopen:

Education has stopped. Students are at home. That is a lot of harm for all of us. (P14—Some/completed ABE/NFE urban resident)

The schools in Somalia are almost all private, financing themselves from the tuition fees they raise from students. When the education stopped, the schools became bankrupt and many of them have closed forever. If they don't get subsidies, they will close forever. (P5—Government education official responsible for HE)

Mogadishu participants reported that online alternatives to in-person attendance had been launched by various entities (government, educational institutions, telecommunications companies and international actors) to try to continue education during the pandemic. However, they reported that the value of these initiatives has been undermined by the unreliability of internet services and low levels of access even when the internet does work due to lack of access to the relevant technology in most cases and their concern that online teaching makes it harder to monitor quality and effectiveness:

Students are now struggling with the new online form of conducting education. Many of them cannot even access the online systems. (P3—Government education official responsible for ABE/NFE)

People are not adopting online classes. Even for those who can access them, the quality is low, and they cannot be monitored. (P8—ABE/NFE educator)

A primary school educator claimed that there was an imbalanced focus on providing online learning for university students rather than primary or secondary school students:

We were not technologically prepared for such a pandemic. The students in the universities have access to digital learning, but in primary and secondary schools it is like a blackout where we don't have classes at any time. (P6—Primary school educator)

The use of students' previous academic performance to replace the normal assessment processes in the award of qualifications in some cases was cited by one Mogadishu participant as a pragmatic alternative:

The students have lost almost a year of their education. Evaluations were made to grade students. It was the least that could have been done. (P7—Secondary school educator)

However, much more often participants said that they were worried that this approach will be detrimental to students in the future by leaving gaps in their knowledge and achievements and by the possibility that students will forget much of what they had learned:

There has been a gap in that process for the last few months. It has been an "unlearning" experience for most of us. The online system that was introduced was also a challenge for many. The national exams are sat based on the assumption that the students have received an online education and that will really impact them forever. (P10—HE educator)

One participant expressed concern about students being under-prepared when they do sit exams:

Now the students are going to sit their national exams, they are having difficulties as they were at home for about three months without proper education or revision. (P20—Some/completed primary school nomadic pastoralist)

Table 6. Impact of COVID-19 and responses to it on education—Hargeisa.

| How much harm has COVID-19 and responses to it done to education in Somalia/Somaliland? | | | |
|---|---------------|---------|----------------------|
| A lot of harm | A little harm | No harm | Don't know/no answer |
| 100% | 0% | 0% | 0% |

Almost identically to those in Mogadishu, all Hargeisa participants responded that "A lot of harm" had been caused to the education sector by COVID-19 and responses to it:

It was damaged badly, and I hope it will recover soon, Insha' Allah. (P40—

Some/completed primary school nomadic pastoralist)

There was also a similar focus across the two locations on the closure of educational institutions:

All education centers were closed for five months which harmed the education for this year, 2020-2021. (P33—Some/completed secondary school urban resident)

It caused harm because around 1600 educational centers were closed down due to COVID-19 in March this year. We can only imagine how it negatively impacted the education sector—the most affected sector in Somaliland. (P24—Government education official responsible for TVET)

To tackle the inability to teach in person, Hargeisa participants reported that online lessons via platforms such as Zoom were introduced but that standards were low and that most students had limited or no access to the internet:

Education was suspended; it closed down across the country. We have been missing a lot but have had some transitional studies online. They do not meet the required standards. (P36—Some/completed HE urban resident)

One of the harms of COVID-19 is that poor people cannot afford online courses because of a lack of access to the internet. Zoom courses are also very weak. (P28—ABE/NFE educator)

Another form of harm reported by Hargeisa participants, again similar to the answers of participants from Mogadishu, relates to students' examinations and grades.

Children dropped education syllabuses and they will have difficulties when returning to school. It is obvious that COVID-19 has damaged the education system very seriously and it will need to recover thoroughly. (P27—Secondary school educator)

It immediately affected the education system: educationally, systematically and the delivery of the expected results per the scholastic plan. (P23—Government education official responsible for Alternative Basic Education/Non-Formal Education)

For example, one participant was concerned that the students would not be at a sufficient level to enter the following academic year as normal:

They passed through evaluation grades on their exams and they will be challenged on the next grade in the upcoming year with the connecting syllabuses. (P30—HE Educator)

In sum, participants were strongly of the view that education had been harmed severely by closures, with concerns about the longer-term ramifications for progress.

4.2. Positive Education Responses

We asked participants “Do you know of any examples of positive education res-

ponses to COVID-19 in Somalia/Somaliland?” (Table 7 & Table 8).

Table 7. Education responses to COVID-19—Mogadishu.

| Do you know of any examples of positive education responses to COVID-19 in Somalia/Somaliland? | | | |
|--|-------|------|----------------------|
| Many | A few | None | Don't know/no answer |
| 20% | 50% | 25% | 5% |

70% of Mogadishu participants said they knew of “Many” or “A few” examples of positive education responses. Some stated that the introduction of online teaching led them to learn new digital and life skills whilst at home:

We gained good and positive experiences from the pandemic; we learned digital skills in the process. Another positive is that we are now prepared for another pandemic. (P16—Some/completed HE urban resident)

Online education and literacy are now incorporated into the skills of our children. (P12—Some/completed primary school urban resident)

One urban resident also reported that families had more time at home together to discuss things:

For now, students and their parents are at home and they have time together to talk to each other more. We have also learned how to use digital tools to continue our education. (P14—Some/completed ABE/NFE urban resident)

While some Mogadishu participants had a negative view of qualifications being awarded based on teacher evaluations of past performance rather than examinations, one rural resident saw this as a positive response to the pandemic:

One good response was the evaluation that the students received to assess their grades. That was a positive education response. (P18—Some/completed primary school rural resident)

Although one TVET educator stated that the government’s response to COVID-19 was inadequate, this person and others praised the Government’s decision to close schools and provide some personal protective equipment (PPE):

The response helped us because our children are now safe because they are staying at home and are not contracting the disease. (P17—No formal education ever rural resident)

The positive responses such as provision of PPE were welcomed but some thought that those responses were too slow:

Some schools were even provided with PPE equipment. However, the Ministry of Education’s response was very low. There are positive responses, but they have been very late. (P9—TVET educator)

Two participants claimed that the process would ensure that the Government

is better prepared in future:

One positive response is that the Government has now realized the importance of being prepared for a problem of this type. (P3—Government education official responsible for ABE/NFE)

If there is one positive from COVID-19, it is that we are now prepared for another pandemic because we are aware of what needs to be done. (P6—Primary school educator)

Some of the Mogadishu participants indicated that they did not know of any positive education responses, and an HE educator was skeptical of the value of online learning for young people:

I cannot imagine an eight-year-old student sitting before a computer to take lessons online. That is not a positive response for me. (P10—HE educator)

Table 8. Education responses to COVID-19—Hargeisa.

| Do you know of any examples of positive education responses to COVID-19 in Somalia/Somaliland? | | | |
|--|-------|------|----------------------|
| Many | A few | None | Don't know/no answer |
| 45% | 55% | 0% | 0% |

All Hargeisa participants indicated that they were aware of positive education responses to COVID-19. Hargeisa participants tended to have a positive view of alternatives to face to face education methods including TV, radio and online platforms:

The Ministry, through coordination as well as contribution, with other educational stakeholders developed a relevant programme called Learn from Air where students received lessons from their respective institutions through TV programmes, radio programmes, WhatsApp, Zoom and even Facebook. (P23—Government education official responsible for ABE/NFE)

However, some participants also reported problems such as lack of experience in using them, those methods not reaching all who require them and limited access to the necessary traditional and digital technologies:

The teachers and schools were informed that the courses will be aired on radio and televisions and the university courses would be via Zoom and Google platforms, despite the unreliability of the internet and in spite of a lack of experience using the Zoom and Google platforms. Therefore, it was a good try. (P28—ABE/NFE educator)

There was the approach to record the lessons for the second term and transmit them through TV as well as through Radio Hargeisa. The internet was another option, mostly used in private education including the universities. 100% of targeted children were not reached due to some of them not having TVs or radios. (P22—Government education official responsible for

secondary schools)

Some Hargeisa participants reported further limitations, such as insufficient consideration being given to different contexts, social groups and educational sub-sectors:

There were negative responses as well, like suspending education without evaluating the different contexts of our nation, urban and rural, or how different social groups would be affected. (P30—HE educator)

There were a lot of responses, but I disagree with some of the steps taken by the Ministry of Education. When the technical schools were already closed, the educational schools were still working online. There were no positive responses. (P29—TVET educator)

Even though HE reaches the smallest number of people, one participant said there was a tendency for provision to be focused mainly at the HE level:

Some of the university students had the best systems through this [remote] process, while primary schools were the most affected in getting education through the online system. (P35—Some/completed TVET urban resident)

Overall, participants could think of positive examples of education responses aimed at compensating for the closures (mainly online, radio and TV provision) but saw their value as limited and uneven.

4.3. Impacts on Disadvantaged Groups

We asked participants “Do you know of any positive or negative impacts of COVID-19 and responses to it on education for people in disadvantaged groups? (e.g. nomadic pastoralists, rural dwellers, women, girls, Internally Displaced Persons, low caste workers, minority clan members, illiterate people).”

The participants in Mogadishu reported only negative impacts of COVID-19 responses with regard to education for disadvantaged groups: they emphasized lack of access to education as the main problem as a result of poverty and their needs not being taken into account by those in authority:

Most of the disadvantaged people are out of the education system as they don't have access to digital tools such as laptops and internet, except for a few who can access radio education programs. (P16—Some/completed HE urban resident)

Learning has stopped for them. Smartphones and internet use are a luxury for them, and they cannot access them. (P12—Some/completed primary school urban resident)

They cannot afford to access the new digital education being conducted. I know of some disadvantaged people who have to spend \$5, weekly, on internet to access online classes. That amount is above the income level they receive throughout the week. (P10—HE educator)

One participant stated that disadvantage for rural residents is not new:

The disadvantaged people feel the same. Before, we felt left out, and it is the same now. (P17—No formal education ever rural resident)

Some participants in Mogadishu reported an increased vulnerability amongst children, and particularly girls, to violence and exploitation due to them spending more time at home:

Girls are at home and with plenty of time with their family members. They are vulnerable to forced or early marriages. (P16—Some/completed HE urban resident)

Other Mogadishu participants stated that some already disadvantaged workers who worked in schools lost their jobs and therefore their incomes due to closures of educational institutions:

Some of the disadvantaged people used to work at educational centers to earn their living. That has stopped now. They experience financial challenges to fund the expenses of their children, as they are now at home and not earning anything. (P18—Some/completed primary school rural resident)

Some people have had negative impacts on employment, as the schools and universities they used to work for are now closed. (P8—ABE/NFE educator)

Hargeisa participants gave similar examples of only negative impacts on the already disadvantaged. Some made the point that no specific consideration had been given to disadvantaged groups in COVID-19 education responses and that, as a result, their position was worse than before in absolute and relative terms:

Responses were not specific to one group or another; they were focused on sustaining education. For those disadvantaged groups, they were isolated before COVID-19 and have been affected badly as well. There is no specific agenda for them during this period. (P32—Some/completed primary school urban resident)

They are neglected and this situation has just contributed to how seriously they are neglected. (P33—Some/completed secondary school urban resident)

We were again told that rural communities have received very little support compared to urban areas:

I never observed support for those living in the countryside and the rural villages. But there were many responses in urban areas as we observed from the media. (P39—No formal education ever nomadic pastoralist)

A government education official did report that portable radios were distributed to some disadvantaged people so they could engage with lessons that were broadcast:

Lessons were recorded and transmitted. To those [disadvantaged] groups, there were small portable radios bought for them for the recorded lessons. But I am not saying they were all given them. The Ministry is still planning

to distribute more. (P22—Government education official responsible for secondary schools)

As in Mogadishu, it was reported that the livelihoods of disadvantaged groups in Hargeisa had been negatively affected. Their incomes have been reduced, there are few alternative employment opportunities for them, and access to education mostly depends on ability to pay:

Poor people and minority people were supposed to get help from the Government such as the distribution of food and basic needs, promoting small businesses and getting medical drugs. None of this happened, even while the Vice President and the National Committee for COVID-19 pledged support. Also, low-income people did not get any support from the government. (P28—ABE/NFE educator)

Those groups were affected seriously; not only in education but in their livelihoods, their income and in seeking any opportunities because they are poor people. They faced the worst situation during COVID-19 country-wide. (P35—Some/completed TVET urban resident)

In sum, the message from the participants is that, while there were some efforts to address the needs of the most disadvantaged, these were the exception and so disadvantage due to issues such as gender, poverty and rural location increased in this period.

5. Feedback on Preliminary Findings

We spoke with the participants and presented our preliminary findings, asking whether they agreed or disagreed with them (**Table 9** & **Table 10**). This method helped to ensure the validity of our findings and explore their nuances.

Table 9. Feedback on preliminary findings—Mogadishu.

| | Here are our preliminary findings from our first sets of interviews with you and the other participants. Please let us know whether you agree/disagree. | | | | | |
|--|---|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------|
| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Don't know/no answer |
| The availability of education in Somalia/Somaliland is fairly good, but finances can be a major barrier to this | 45% | 30% | 10% | 10% | 5% | 0% |
| You want more focus on, and resources for, vocational training and informal education | 80% | 20% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Rural areas have less access to education, and the quality is lower when available. Further assistance in accessing education, such as scholarships, is required | 75% | 25% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| The national curriculum is a lot better than it was and is still improving | 40% | 30% | 10% | 10% | 5% | 5% |
| There is a lack of regulation and standardisation in the education sector; you want more accountability | 50% | 45% | 5% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| People are satisfied with the quality level of Higher Education in Somalia/Somaliland | 30% | 20% | 10% | 30% | 10% | 0% |

Continued

| | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|
| The education system lacks equality. Opportunities are dependent on age, location and income | 65% | 35% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| The response of closing schools and universities helped to ensure people's safety from COVID-19 | 40% | 35% | 0% | 10% | 15% | 0% |
| The closure of schools has encouraged the learning of new, digital skills | 30% | 30% | 25% | 5% | 5% | 5% |
| Using evaluations of students' previous progress as a substitute to examinations is damaging to the students' progress in the future | 35% | 25% | 25% | 15% | 0% | 0% |
| Children, and specifically young girls, are more vulnerable at home following the education response to COVID-19 | 20% | 35% | 30% | 5% | 10% | 0% |
| School closures negatively affected the livelihoods and incomes of disadvantaged groups. These groups were not directly considered during the COVID-19 response | 80% | 15% | 5% | 0% | 0% | 0% |

Among Mogadishu participants there was consensus or near consensus (95% agreement) that there should be more focus on and resources for vocational and informal education (that is, education outside of a structured curriculum); that rural areas are relatively neglected in educational provision and require financial assistance to increase access to quality education; that the education system is unequal in terms of older, poorer and rural people being disadvantaged; and that the system is under-regulated.

Education is available in the major cities. But those of us who live in the rural areas cannot access education. (P17—No formal education ever rural resident)

We need more resources for vocational training. In that regard, we can equip our people with skills that can help them boost their livelihoods. The quality of the Higher Education in Somalia has a long way to go and is far from being satisfactory. (P3—Government education official responsible for ABE/NFE)

There were clear majorities supporting the positions that access to education was good for those who have sufficient funds and that the standardized national curriculum was a step in the right direction. Participants had a wide range of views about whether the quality of HE was high, with a tendency to be more critical among those with more experience of education, especially as an educator:

The quality of Higher Education is not at a level to be satisfied with. (P2—Government education official responsible for secondary schools)

Quality of Higher Education is low. (P1—Government education official responsible for Primary schools)

75% of Mogadishu participants agreed that closing educational institutions helped protect people from COVID-19 but 25% disagreed. Those who disagreed did so because they thought that people and especially young people were simply

gathering in groups elsewhere without any COVID-19 precautions:

The students were at the markets, restaurants and public places when the schools were closed. The closure of schools didn't make them to stay indoors or be protected from the pandemic. (P4—Government education official responsible for TVET)

There was a narrow majority supporting the idea that the closures had brought about the acquisition of new digital teaching and learning skills, with uncertainty and reservations due to awareness that only a small minority has access to the internet, computers and smart phones, and due to skepticism about the standard of digital skills among those who do have internet access:

Awareness of digital skills has increased but students have not acquired the skills. (P1—Government education official responsible for Primary schools)

Another narrow majority thought that students' progress would be harmed by award of qualifications based on students' past performance as a substitute for holding in-person examinations. There was near unanimity (95% agreement) that the education closures had negatively affected the livelihoods of disadvantaged groups, and that the needs of those groups had not been addressed in COVID-19 responses. The view that children and especially girls were more at risk from not being in educational institutions received bare majority support:

Table 10. Feedback on preliminary findings—Hargeisa.

| | Here are our preliminary findings from our first sets of interviews with you and the other participants. Please let us know whether you agree/disagree. | | | | | |
|--|---|-------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------|
| | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Don't know/no answer |
| The availability of education in Somalia/Somaliland is fairly good, but finances can be a major barrier to this | 20% | 70% | 0% | 10% | 0% | 0% |
| You want more focus on, and resources for, vocational training and informal education | 40% | 55% | 5% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Rural areas have less access to education, and the quality is lower when available. Further assistance in accessing education, such as scholarships, is required | 35% | 65% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| The national curriculum is a lot better than it was and is still improving | 5% | 90% | 0% | 5% | 0% | 0% |
| There is a lack of regulation and standardisation in the education sector; you want more accountability | 25% | 65% | 0% | 10% | 0% | 0% |
| People are satisfied with the quality level of higher education in Somalia/Somaliland | 0% | 55% | 5% | 40% | 0% | 0% |
| The education system lacks equality. Opportunities are dependent on age, location and income | 10% | 55% | 0% | 35% | 0% | 0% |
| The response of closing schools and universities helped to ensure people's safety from COVID-19 | 35% | 65% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| The closure of schools has encouraged the learning of new, digital skills | 20% | 65% | 0% | 15% | 0% | 0% |

Continued

| | | | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|
| Using evaluations of students' previous progress as a substitute to examinations is damaging to the students' progress in the future | 15% | 45% | 0% | 40% | 0% | 0% |
| Children, and specifically young girls, are more vulnerable at home following the education response to COVID-19 | 5% | 45% | 0% | 40% | 0% | 10% |
| School closures negatively affected the livelihoods and incomes of disadvantaged groups. These groups were not directly considered during the COVID-19 response | 15% | 70% | 0% | 15% | 0% | 0% |

The Hargeisa participants were in full or almost full agreement about the availability of education being dependent on personal income, the neglect of rural education, the desire for more technical and informal education, the value of the national curriculum and the need for greater regulation of the sector:

There are students who most of the time worry about transportation costs to attend their classes especially the ones who lives in the rural areas. (P27—Secondary school educator)

The curriculum did not have manuals before, now it is well put together and the language has improved too. (P27—Secondary school educator)

They were polarized over whether the system was unequal in relation to age, location and income; this reflects their tendency to treat equality as a matter of potential opportunity rather than current reality:

It is a constitutional obligation that all Somaliland children should be taught freely but there are issues of relevant capacity. (P25—Government education official responsible for HE)

They were also polarized about how satisfied people were over the quality of HE:

Most of the students who graduated from universities in the country cannot remember what they have studied last year as the quality of the education is poor. (P27—Secondary school educator)

These responses aligned quite strongly with those of the Mogadishu participants. All Hargeisa participants agreed that educational institution closures helped protect people from COVID-19 and 85% thought that the closures had led to the propagation of new digital skills. Nevertheless, 85% thought that disadvantaged people had been harmed by the closures and had not been supported. 60% agreed that evaluations in place of examinations were damaging for students' future progress while 40% disagreed. 50% thought that children and especially girls had been made more vulnerable by being unable to attend education but 40% disagreed. One participant offered a traditionalist view of the suitability of girls to do domestic labour but still endorsed the importance of girls having time to study properly:

Young girls doing housework is mandatory in our culture, but I do not

agree with the fact that they do this excessively, so they won't have time to do homework and affect their grades. What is also necessary to note is that young girls are better at mathematics than boys as they are also busy calculating food costs when their mothers ask them to buy food and bread.
(P27—Secondary school educator)

Overall, this review of our preliminary findings confirmed the main areas of agreement and disagreement while providing additional insight and nuance about the views underpinning them.

6. Conclusion

Educational institution closures in the Mogadishu and Hargeisa areas as part of public health efforts to control COVID-19 have had strongly negative effects on education and on society more broadly, according to the participants in our research. The list of negative effects reported is: extensive-harm to students' education and progress; the collapse of the incomes of education institutions which may never reopen; the loss of livelihoods (especially of low income workers in the sector or providing goods and services to it); a shift to online provision which is inaccessible to the vast majority of the population; lessons on TV and radio which are still beyond the means of many; rural areas and technical education being left even further behind as provision prioritises urban populations and HE; and the increased vulnerability of girls to violence, abuse and use for domestic labour to a degree that prevents home study. These perceptions align with the findings of our other work on how responses to COVID-19 have exacerbated relative disadvantage in Somalia/Somaliland (Herring et al., 2020a). Building back better in education as a response to COVID-19 is not happening in Somalia/Somaliland when looked at overall, as even the positive efforts, while laudable in themselves, are exacerbating inequalities.

The forms of inequality identified in this research predate COVID-19 but increased awareness of them and how they have become worse recently could help to motivate action to address them. We found extensive support among the participants for such remedial action. The tendency of the participants to rate positively the availability and quality of education in their area was surprising, considering the evidence to the contrary (high levels of illiteracy, low levels of access to education and predominantly low standards at all levels—see Herring et al., 2020b: p. 2). The puzzle was resolved through further discussion with participants: it became clear that they were thinking in terms of progress made since the period of civil war and state collapse. There was also a secondary effect that, the less education a participant had, the more likely they were to have a perception that education was available and of good quality. In terms of ways forward, the high level of agreement among participants on many issues—primarily on the need for more regulation, technical education, rural education, support for poorer people to access education and attention to the educational needs of girls and older people plus continued development of national curricula—suggests

the potential for broad-based support for building education back in a better, more inclusive form after the COVID-19 closures. Translating that support into a reality requires action on various fronts. The top priority would be generating the political ability and will to move in that direction. Then action can be taken to direct or redirect existing resources to that end. However, the issue is as much overcoming the absence of an education system in Somalia/Somaliland as it is one of transforming the education system to the extent that it exists now: the scale of resources that requires is many times that which is currently available.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) grant ES/T002646/1 as part of the Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures (TESF) project (<https://tesf.network/>).

We would like to thank our forty project participants for sharing their perspectives and insights. We hope that this report represents those perspectives and insights effectively. We would also like to express our thanks for the review comments on an earlier draft.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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