Is it the right time to re-open schools in Papua New Guinea amidst COVID-19?

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Papua New Guinea (PNG), like most countries in the world, was caught by surprise with the global novel coronavirus pandemic or COVID-19 outbreak in early January 2020. While there are now almost 1.5 billion children or 87% of the global children population affected by school closures in nearly 165 countries around the world, 60 million teachers are also at home. The bulk of these children are enrolled in primary and secondary schools, but there are also millions of students affected at the pre-primary and tertiary education levels, and the statistics are likely to escalate exponentially by the day.

According to NBC TV News on the 21st April 2020, primary and secondary schools will reopen on Monday 4th May 2020 which makes PNG one of the first countries in the world to reopen its schools. This announcement has brought about mixed reactions from parents and the general population. While some people welcome the resumption of classes this soon, the majority as seen on all social media platforms, are in opposition to this government decision given the fact that COVID-19 is now present in the country.

Countries that have strong economies have switched to online or e-learning while some low-middle income countries have closed the academic year due to the lack of proper e-education facilities and/or other matters related to COVID-19. Since PNG’s situation is similar to the latter but chooses to reopen schools otherwise, due to the limited number of positive COVID-19 cases with no deaths so far, five important points need to be considered as shown below:

- **Classrooms in PNG are overcrowded** – According to an on-going study by the PNG National Research Institute (PNG NRI), teacher-pupil ratio is alarming as a result of the Tuition Fee Free (TFF) policy. What used to be a ratio of 1: 35 or 1: 40 in the past, we now see a ratio of 1: 50 or 1: 60 students to one teacher. Urban centres have a high risk of spreading COVID-19 if there is an outbreak as there is now up to 80 -100 students to one teacher in a class.

- **Social distancing will be problematic** – As the capacity of classrooms are being filled to the brim with students, there is very little space to manoeuver given the fact that in some overcrowded classrooms the sitting space arrangement from one student to another is approximately 20 - 30 centimetres.

- **Shared teaching and learning resources poses threat** – What is worth noting too, is the fact that most schools have very limited teaching and learning resources. As a result, text books, reading books, worksheets etc. are shared between one to two, or three students which further exacerbates the situation thus violating the State of Emergency (SOE) directives of 1.5 metres of social distancing.
Toilets and sanitation remains an issue – According to an on-going study by PNG NRI, toilets in schools are a concern. Most schools that were surveyed had issues with toilets. One school at the time of our study, was closed due to unhygienic and health practices. As such, schools need to revisit the statuses of their toilets and carry out immediate upgrades to meet the SOE directives upon resumption of classes.

How to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on learning during reopening of schools

As the PNG Government embarks on reopening schools in a week’s time, it is imperative that students are provided with holistic support and maintaining school safe operations. As such, it is recommended that the following are adhered to in terms of protecting the students and their families:

• In order to mitigate overcrowding in the classroom, and social distancing to be captured in schools, introduce shift teaching where a teacher splits his/her class into two and teaches the first half in the morning and the second half in the afternoon.

• Teachers need to prepare students’ learning materials in bulk for students to work on during their half-a-day non-contact period at home.

• Provide children with information on how to protect themselves.

• Provide testing kits or at least thermometers for monitoring and identifying potential COVID-19 patients in schools.

• Promote best handwashing and hygiene practices and provide hygiene supplies for the students.

• Clean and disinfect school buildings, especially water and sanitation facilities.

• Increase airflow ventilation

If facilities required to promote social distancing and good hygiene cannot be guaranteed before the re-opening of schools, the Government should consider moving the re-opening date forward to around end of May 2020. This should give school authorities enough time to provide all the necessary facilities required to prevent spread of COVID-19 in schools. It can also provide us the opportunity to draw lessons from countries that have re-opened their schools.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is now beginning to take its toll in most countries around the world. While the number of deaths continue to escalate globally, some countries are now planning to reopen schools depending on the flattening of the curve, which provide a positive outlook towards recovery. Although life will not return to normalcy soon, the move by the PNG Government to reopen primary and secondary schools in PNG on the 4th of May needs to be taken with a caution. As
long as schools are prepared well in terms of re-organising students’ sitting arrangements in the classroom, one text book or one learning resource per child, health and hygiene measures prepared and most importantly, toilets are upgraded to the standard approved by the National Department of Health, parents will be at ease and will willingly let their children to school. If schools are not prepared, the Government should consider giving school authorities more time to prepare before re-opening schools.