COVID-19 pandemic: A test for PNG education security

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Countries over the world including Papua New Guinea (PNG) are facing challenges associated with coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The virus is a health security issue linked to economic, food, education, and political security issues. In the course of planning to tackle the pandemic, the government should consider connecting all the human security issues together.

While the Government of PNG (GoPNG) focuses on minimising the spread of the virus through restrictions on movement of people, its impact is taking a toll on different areas. Students’ education is one of these areas which this blog will focus on. Education security embraces all measures taken to combat threats to students’ learning and its continuousness in times of such crisis.

Our education security concerns

1. National Department of Education (NDoE) and schools seem not to have an effective Crisis Response Plan.

2. It would be difficult for GoPNG to prepare secondary and primary schools to move to online learning as majority of these schools are in remote areas where technology literacy is low and access to internet is limited.

3. Higher education needs an electronic Learning Management System such as moodle to ensure continual learning and to drive inclusive learning for vulnerable students such as those with disabilities.

4. Number of students per classroom (class size) in primary and secondary schools in public schools are often high. It is a challenge for the NDoE and schools’ administration to increase the number of classrooms and seats to achieve the World Health Organisation recommended social distancing of 1.5 meters.

5. Parents were skeptical on whether to allow their children to go back to school when the National Department of Education (NDoE) announced the re-open of schools.

NDoE and all schools need to have in place an effective and efficient Crises Response Plan to address the COVID-19 pandemic. There are several steps that schools can take to provide continual learning and a safe environment, and that is to: work collaboratively and effectively with the government, controllers, and the Department of Health to stop the spread of COVID-19.
School Crises Response Plan

Every school in PNG should have a Crisis Response Plan (CRP) to respond to outbreaks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The CRP should outline a number of specific action plans schools can use in response to the pandemic. These include:

- Communication Action Plan
- Health Action Plan
- Continuity Action Plan
- Recovery Action Plan

Communication Action Plan

The aim of the communication action plan is to make sure that accurate information is delivered to students, parents, staff, and the general public on time.

Schools should consider drafting several communications and social media posts such as:

- When there are confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the country;
- When significant number of students are found ill; and,
- When schools need to close due to the illness.

Health Action Plan

The aim of the health action plan is to encourage daily precautionary measures for all staff, students, and families.

- Maintaining personal hygiene as reported by the Australian Government Department of Health [here];
- Update information from the NDoH about the symptoms associated with COVID-19 and make it available for the students and staff;
- Conduct active surveillance to identify COVID-19 symptoms such as the review of temperature logs, find out if student or staff are absent, check out who is in the hospital, and investigate unexplained deaths;
- Make sure that school administrators control access to the campus and buildings. Close certain entrances and exits and identify a main entrance and monitor it. This is to ensure that students and staff are screened before moving to classrooms or other areas of the school;

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School administration and staff should provide parents, guardians, and students with information regarding how to address the stress and anxiety that might be generated by COVID-19.

Continuity Action Plan

The aim of a Continuity Action Plan (CAP) is to ensure:

1. Continuity of students learning during and after the occurrence of COVID-19 and other crisis that may come. CAP will enable the school administration to continue with learning activities if there are school closures or extended absences. This includes the following:
   - Online learning activities;
   - Web-based teacher tutorials or check-ins;
   - Live classes; and,
   - Guidance on providing services to students with disabilities.
2. Guidelines for staff members who need to continue working even during school closures.
3. How to maintain essential school operations like maintaining teachers' and staff's payroll during closures.

Recovery Action Plan

The reason for the Recovery action plan is to ensure the normal functioning of the school once COVID-19 is contained. This includes the following:

- Re-establish classroom learning and daily schedules;
- Maintain surveillance on COVID-19;
- Maintain communication with the health authority, parents, and guardians;
- Continuous monitoring and assessment of the students and staff health needs; and,
- Evaluate and assess infection-control measures.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has created a crisis that has put all human security elements at risk. This makes the current situation more volatile and challenging for governments and those who are at the frontline fighting against the pandemic. Department of Education and other sectors should always be

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prepared for a pandemic such as the COVID-19. This can be done by having in place emergency response or operation plans. This will assist in providing guidance to address the pandemic and protect learning activity and continuity of the school concurrently.