A Review of Global COVID-19 Response Frameworks for Education

WANJIRU KARIUKI

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ABSTRACT

This study enters the 'kitchens of science' or the 'backrooms' of international development agencies to examine the methods used to develop global COVID-19 response frameworks for education. These global frameworks need to be scrutinized as they are used to guide the development of national COVID-19 response frameworks for education. Drawing upon the theory of change, the study examines how the interventions embedded in these global frameworks are produced. The results show methodological flaws and epistemic violence in the production process of these global frameworks. It is suggested that epistemic accountability and epistemic reflexivity are necessary to resolve these methodological and epistemic vices.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Wanjiru Kariuki

Ministry Education, IN

drwanjirukariuki@gmail.com

FOCAL PROBLEM

This study reflects on the methodological issues that shape the development of global COVID-19 response frameworks for education. Specifically, the study reviews these global frameworks to determine if they: (1) clarify the key challenges and changes they seek to address; (2) are informed by evidence and stakeholder input; (3) make explicit the major risks that could affect their achievement; and (4) identify the key partners/actors likely to have a direct role in ensuring that the change effort is achieved. The key research question is: How are the global COVID-19 response frameworks for education formulated and with what resources? Using the theory of change, the study focuses on the interventions of change outlined in these global frameworks to discern whether they are developed through inclusive methodologies.

BACKGROUND

On 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) a pandemic (WHO, 2020a). By May 2020, the disease had affected 215 countries around the world with 3,726,292 confirmed cases and 257,405 deaths (WHO, 2020b). To prevent and control the spread of the disease, WHO rolled out a plethora of public health measures such as individual-level physical distancing, quarantining, population level physical distancing measures, and appropriate and proportionate restrictions on non-essential domestic and international travel (WHO, 2020c).

Accordingly, several countries around the world shut down education and training institutions to prevent or slow down the spread of COVID-19. In the period between March 11, 2020 and February 2, 2021, schools were fully closed for an average of 95 instruction days globally, which represented approximately 50 per cent of the time intended for classroom instruction. Globally, 214 million students from pre-primary to upper secondary education in 23 countries missed at least 75 per cent of classroom instruction time. Of these 214 million learners, 168 million in 14 countries missed almost all classroom instruction time due to the school closures (UNICEF, 2021).

The school closures disrupted learning globally with detrimental outcomes. According to UNICEF (2022), the school closures led to loss of learning and deprived learners the benefits of safety, health, nutrition and wellbeing which were provided by the education and training institutions. Prolonged school closures exacerbated existing disparities in education as learning losses disproportionately affected the most vulnerable learners. In 2020, an estimated 24 million students from pre-primary to tertiary levels of education were deemed at risk of not returning to school due to COVID-induced education disruptions. As a result of the national school closures, the current generation of learners' risked losing as much as $17 trillion dollars in lifetime earnings in present value, representing 14 per cent of today's global GDP.

It is within this context that international development agencies rapidly developed global COVID-19 response frameworks for education. These frameworks were aimed at controlling the spread of COVID-19 and responding to its impact in the global education arena. These frameworks play a dominant role in shaping the development of national COVID-19 response frameworks for education. The construction of these global frameworks thus needs to be scrutinized. Bourdieu (1993) posits that readers are often confronted with a product with little knowledge on how it has been produced. What is conveyed are the results, but never the operations in the backroom or the kitchen of science. Hence, the finished product (opus operatum) conceals the method (modus operandi).

Although international development agencies play an important role in setting global agendas, they have been known to privilege their epistemologies and interests. Accordingly, McDonnell (2014) notes that African development agendas are dominated by Euro-Western epistemology which have engendered an 'epistemicide' that dismisses the cultural realities of the African people. Indeed, the Bretton Woods Project (2019) posit that development partners such the World Bank and IMF are historically viewed as an instrument of the United States and other Western countries' political and economic power. These institutions are dominant norm-setters, knowledge-holders and influencers of the international development and financial landscape and are known to promote their development policies as part of loans, projects and technical assistance granted to governments.

Koch (2021) points out that unjust epistemic practices in the development arena should be challenged through discussions among academics and aid practitioners, inter-disciplinary dialogue, and movements such as the Black Lives Matter. Custer et al (2021) make a strong case for epistemic inclusion. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders in low- and middle-income countries reported that they preferred development partners that value development processes that are locally-led with politically feasible and contextually appropriate solutions. In this regard, the leaders called for the decolonization of aid. It is instructive, that the Paris Declaration (2005) sets out a practical, action-oriented roadmap to improve the quality of aid and its impact on development. It advocates for developing countries to set their own strategies, align behind these objectives and use local systems (OECD, 2005). In 2008, the Accra Agenda for Action, which was endorsed by ministers of developing countries and donors, re-affirmed the commitment to the Paris Declaration and resolved to develop institutionalized processes for the joint and equal partnership of developing countries and the engagement of stakeholders in promoting development goals (OECD, 2008).

It is against this backdrop that this article questions how the global COVID-19 response frameworks for education are produced.

RESEARCH APPROACH

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of change provides a framework for understanding how the global COVID-19 response frameworks for education are produced. The theory advocates for an inclusive and participatory methodological approach towards the development of knowledge frameworks. The theory emerged in the 1990s in an attempt to address some of the problems evaluators faced when trying to assess the impact of complex social development programs (Flynn, 2012). Early researchers such as Weiss (1995) described it as a theory of how and why an initiative works. More recently, Serrat (2017) has described it is as a purposeful model of how an initiative, such as a policy, a strategy, a program, or a project, contributes through a chain of early and intermediate outcomes to the intended result.

According to Vogel (2012), the theory of change has perceived benefits which include an integrated approach to design, implementation and evaluation and better analysis of the program context. Typically, the theory of change provides a framework for developing strategies, building partnerships, planning interventions, gathering evidence of success or failure and analysing and learning from this evidence through open dialogue among constituents and stakeholders (IPAL – Keystone, 2009). By the same token, Intrac (2012), notes that the theory of change provides a framework for monitoring progress towards change, to examine the weak links in the change pathway, to document lessons learnt about change efforts, to make the process of implementation and impact assessment transparent, and to enhance reporting to stakeholders (Intrac, 2012).

The theory of change has become mainstream among international development agencies. According to Vogel (2012), three key drivers appear to have contributed to the mainstreaming of 'theory of change thinking' in international development. These include a results agenda (the need to demonstrate impact); complexity (the need to address complexities, ambiguities and uncertainties of development work); and country-owned development (the need for country ownership in development collaborations). Several UN agencies, such as UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women, have adopted the theory of change for their main areas of work (UNDP, 2017). UNICEF has for instance used the theory of change as a methodology for planning, participation and evaluation of the 'Rights Respecting Schools Award' across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This award works to change children's experiences in school and is supported by a review of the available evidence (UNICEF, 2017).

The UN has also adopted the theory of change under its United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). The UNDAF theory of change has three key principles, namely: It should be developed through stakeholder consultations, grounded in robust evidence at all stages and support continuous learning and improvement from program design to closure. Furthermore, four sequenced steps are recommended under the UNDAF theory of change. It starts with a focus on the change the UN intends to contribute to; followed by identifying what is needed

for the desired development change to happen, informed by the evidence; establishing and making explicit the key assumptions underpinning the theory of how change happens and the major risks that may affect it; and identifying partners and actors who will be most relevant for achieving each result, taking into account the related risks and assumptions (UN, 2014).

METHOD

This study reviewed the global COVID-19 response frameworks for education developed by the international development agencies that are mandated to develop global health and education frameworks. This study chose to focus on the frameworks that were developed between 2020 and 2021, since this is the period during which the COVID-19 pandemic was prevalent. The frameworks reviewed in this study are outlined below:

i. 'Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19' developed by World Health Organisation (WHO).

ii 'Key messages and actions for COVID-19 prevention and control in schools' developed by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), WHO and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

iii 'Reopening schools' developed by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UNICEF, the World Bank, World Food Programme (WFP) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

iv 'Supporting teachers in back-to-school efforts: Guidance for policy-makers', developed by UNESCO and International Labour Organization (ILO).

v 'Guidance for safe and healthy journeys to school during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond' developed by UNICEF, FIA (Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile) foundation and Child Health Initiative.

vi 'Global guidance on reopening early childhood education settings' developed by UNICEF, World Bank and UNESCO.

These frameworks were reviewed using a checklist with criteria derived from the theory of change, namely:

- Problem identification: focus on the change that the framework intends to contribute to;
- Interventions: solutions or desired development changes, informed by evidence and stakeholder input;
- Risk approach: explicit analysis of risks most relevant to whether change will be realized; and
- Role of key partners: key actors whose common effort will be required in order for change to take place.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 below presents the analyses of the global COVID-19 frameworks for education against the criteria derived from the theory of change.

Based on the review of the global COVID-19 frameworks for education, two themes have emerged, namely, methodological and epistemological gaps.

a). Methodological gaps

The global COVID-19 response frameworks for education reviewed had methodological gaps related to omission of problem identification, stakeholder input, evidence input, risk approaches and the role of stakeholders. Out of the six frameworks reviewed, one framework did not clearly define the change that it intended to contribute to. Only two frameworks had developed interventions that were informed by sector wide stakeholders. Half of the frameworks did not make reference to the research that had been utilized to develop them. Only one framework had made an explicit analysis of the risks relevant to the proposed change interventions. Finally, only two frameworks had identified the relevant partners required to achieve the results related to the proposed interventions. These omissions are methodological flaws.

This finding is consistent with that of Wiser (2014) who noted that dominant international development frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable

	PROBLEM CLEARLY IDENTIFIED	INTERVENTIONS CLEARLY IDENTIFIED	INTERVENTIONS INFORMED BY EXPERTS	INTERVENTIONS INFORMED BY STAKEHOLDER INPUT	INTERVENTIONS INFORMED BY EVIDENCE	RISK APPROACH ARTICULATED	ROLE OF KEY PARTNERS ARTICULATED
1. 'Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19' developed by WHO.	√	√	√	x	√	√	x
2. 'Key messages and actions for COVID-19 prevention and control in schools' developed by UNICEF, WHO and IFRC.	√	√	√	x	x	x	√
3. 'Reopening schools' developed by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, WFP and UNHCR.	√	√	√	x	√	x	x
4. 'Supporting teachers in back-to-school efforts: Guidance for policy-makers', developed by UNESCO and ILO.	√	√	√	x	x	x	x
5. 'Guidance for safe and healthy journeys to school during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond' developed by UNICEF, FIA foundation and Child Health Initiative.	x	√	√	√	√	x	√
6. 'Global guidance on reopening early childhood education settings' developed by UNICEF, World Bank and UNESCO.	√	√	√	√	x	x	x

Table 1 Analysis of the Global COVID-19 frameworks for education.

Development Goals (SDGs) have serious design flaws. Among the most serious flaws cited were lack of reliable data collection methods, adoption of flawed indicators, setting of unrealistic targets, unclear criteria for selection of goals, arbitrary selection of targets, prioritization of insignificant targets, lack of accountability mechanisms and reliance on a small group of experts to develop the frameworks. Likewise, Opitz-Stapleton et al (2019) found that the SDGs framework does not deploy a risk analysis approach that takes cognizance of the multiple and complex threats facing it, thus undermining its achievement.

b). Epistemological gaps

Epistemic oppression[1] is visible in this study when outsiders (epistemic agents outside the international development agencies) appear to be marginalized in the development of the global COVID-19 response frameworks for education. Of the three global frameworks that referenced the research that had informed their formulation, one framework relied on research developed exclusively by international development agencies. The framework for reopening schools developed by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, WFP and UNHCR was informed by research undertaken by WFP, FAO[2], UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank, IASC[3] and WHO. In so doing,

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1   Epistemic oppression is the exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production (Dotson, 2014).

2   FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization.

3   IASC – Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

this framework reproduces a single epistemic order, that of the international development agencies. When the knowledge of 'outsiders' is excluded, the result is epistemic oppression.

Furthermore, epistemic communities[4] were found to shape the construction of the global COVID-19 response frameworks for education, at the exclusion of other epistemic agents. Notably, all the global COVID-19 response frameworks for education were developed by a group of international experts. Although the input of experts in the development of these global frameworks is evident, the same cannot be said for stakeholder input. Half of the frameworks reviewed were not informed by sector-wide stakeholder input. Hence, epistemic oppression is enacted through the subjugation of stakeholder engagement.

This finding resonates with that of Verger, Novelli, and Altinyelken (2018), who noted that international experts that are selected to develop education frameworks are elitist, often referred to as the 'chosen people', known to rehearse and reinforce the development agencies beliefs. Similarly, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (2019) points out that the interpretation of global frameworks is top-down and dominated by experts and elites. Palash (2021) argues that 'international' experts are granted discriminatory credibility as they are considered more knowledgeable and competent than 'local' experts in the development eco-system. Earlier on, Lusthaus (1994) had critiqued development agencies that develop reports that have the principal stakeholder as the agency itself, granted that it is at odds with mainstream development thinking, which emphasizes partnership, policy dialogue, and stakeholder ownership of the development process.

Epistemic oppression is counterproductive. Shahjahan (2016) argues that dominant epistemic activities of international development agencies have been known to promulgate one-size fit all solutions that usually reproduce global inequities. Yet, the UN (2004) calls for the negation of one-size-fits-all formulas in favour of basing support on national assessments, participation, needs and aspirations (UN, 2004). For Verger, Novelli, and Altinyelken (2018), global education policies are adopted by national policy makers for political and economic purposes and not necessarily because they represent best practice or fit into a universally shared understanding of what constitutes 'good education'. As Gilmore et al (2020) note, participatory approaches are thus required to support a robust implementation of COVID-19 response frameworks while supporting equity-informed responses.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how global COVID-19 responsive frameworks for education are developed. Based on this analysis, the following conclusions are made.

First, methodological laxity is evident in the development of the global COVID-19 responsive frameworks for education. There were incidences where critical components such as the problem statement, stakeholder input, evidence utilized, risk approach and role of stakeholders were absent. These omissions are methodological flaws. Yet, the theory of change, which is already mainstreamed in international development, and which could ascertain methodological rigor was not utilized in developing these frameworks. As an epistemic accountability mechanism, it is suggested that future global education frameworks should make their methodologies explicit, lending them to public scrutiny.

Second, epistemic oppression is visible in the development of the global COVID-19 responsive frameworks for education. In this case, epistemic oppression establishes international experts (epistemic communities) and their knowledge systems as credible, discrediting all others. When the knowledge underlying the global frameworks does not extend to other epistemic agents such as stakeholders and researchers outside the international development agencies, epistemic violence occurs. As such, privileging the input from 'insiders' while subjugating that of 'outsiders' bolsters this epistemic vice. If international development agencies are keen to delink themselves from the 'top-down' and 'north-to-south' epistemological approaches, it behoves them to develop non-hegemonic global frameworks.

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4   Epistemic communities are professional networks with authoritative and policy-relevant expertise (Cross, 2013).

This calls for us to reimagine how global COVID-19 responsive frameworks for education should be produced. There is need for epistemic practices that safeguard the global frameworks from methodological and epistemological flaws, which the theory of change enabled me to illuminate. However, the theory of change is limited in making sense of these flaws in a critical manner. It is suggested that the theory of change is refined to incorporate epistemic reflexivity. Following Bourdieu (1998), this means critiquing the assumptions inscribed in the methodological process including the concepts, instruments of analysis and practical operations of research. It also means, critically reflecting on the tensions that arise from the epistemic community's social origin and coordinates such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, position in the field, and intellectual biases. Hence, further research is needed to enhance the conceptual development of the theory of change.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Wanjiru Kariuki ⓘ orcid.org/0000-0002-8904-3642
Ministry Education, IN

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