

## The Impacts of the Pandemic on Mozambican Elementary Education

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**SUMMARY** The COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone to change their ways of living abruptly. It had a visceral impact on the world economy. African countries felt exceptionally and profoundly the pandemic crisis because of budget deficits to invest in public services sectors such as education. This article deals with the impacts of the pandemic on Mozambican elementary education. We argue that it is necessary to balance the approaches, which are neither pessimistic nor optimistic. We recognize that the pandemic unveils and worsens severe problems undermined but visible in the country's daily life. But it also opens new challenges and opportunities for postponed changes, enabling the construction and implementation of other worlds and other necessary and creative ways of organizing and conducting educational activities. Under these critical terms and directions, we intend to reflect here. [Elementary education, COVID-19, impacts, Mozambique]

### Introduction

Public Education Systems (SPE) in Africa are deficient in their functioning. The National Education System (SNE) in Mozambique is no exception. The history of the constitution of African education systems, Mozambican, as well as their colonial inheritances, constitute defining elements (albeit not unique) relevant to be summoned

to understand the problems and challenges they faced since the birth of the independence of African countries.

To understand the SNE constitution processes, their problems, and challenges, we must ask ourselves about the structure and functioning of the society, contexts, and the theoretical and political bases under which educational systems run (Mazula 1995; Maturana 2001). Thus, any studies on Mozambican education, or African contexts, must consider colonial history, even though it recognizes that not all the problems the education system faces reflect this past (Mazula 1995). Such a memory is essential as a starting point for understanding the complexity of historical realities, thus questioning the direction of political processes and examining the challenges that Mozambican society and the educational system face today. Understanding educational processes are possible through reflection on the country's projects (Maturana 2001). In the case of Mozambique, it seems to us that this project is currently not explicit (if it exists). In addition, it has repercussions that reflect the deficient way education works. An example of this is that, with each new government mandate, leaders of the Mozambican Ministry of Education change the content policies without reviewing the cycle and making an in-depth and open assessment within the school community.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global event that changed routine and local life across the planet, with different impacts, both in the present and in the future (Pleyes and Bringel 2020), the weaknesses in the functioning of the Mozambican SNE became much clearer. The pandemic met African education systems, particularly Mozambican, in conditions of impaired functioning, showing the existing weaknesses and inequalities and deepening them, especially about access to modern technologies for education. At least at the beginning of the pandemic's arrival in Mozambique, it was clear that only the most fortunate would have the right to education since they have access to computers and the internet at home. The most impoverished that make up the large population were and are still condemned to social and educational exclusion once they have been stripped of the technological and economic means that the pandemic imposed as alternatives of protection against the virus.

The questions we intend to reflect on in this short article are as follows: What are the effects of the pandemic on the Mozambican National Elementary Education System? How is Mozambique in the education sector dealing with the problems posed by the pandemic? What strategies do exist? What are the fundamentals and limitations of these strategies and choices? How does the pandemic deepen social inequalities within the Mozambican elementary education system? Are social sciences well placed to answer these questions?

### **Contextualizing elementary education in Mozambique: From “massification” to “education for all.”**

Mozambique proclaimed its independence from Portuguese colonialism on June 25, 1975. In the process, the country inherited the structures of the colonial state apparatus, which the transitional government could not transform (Buendía Gómez 1999). This colonial heritage affected the National Education System (SNE), created in 1983 to give Mozambicans the opportunity to dream about the right to access education. This right was denied during the colonial period. SNE aimed “to guarantee a uniform education not only for all children but also for young people, women, adults, the elderly, peasants, workers, former combatants of armed struggle, etc.” (Castiano 2005, 17, personal translation). How to do this without material and financial resources to invest in education, or without trained teachers and enough schools, especially in rural contexts? These are the legacies of colonialism that, unfortunately, continue to this day.

To understand the current SNE in Mozambique, it is inevitable to retreat to education in the colonial context, where it was coherently articulated with the regime's economic, political, ideological, and cultural aims, to reproduce the relations of exploitation and domination. What kind of individuals did the colonial educational system aim to form and educate? What are the interests that individuals should serve? Education in this context managed to sculpt the Mozambican subject in a way that depersonalized and alienated individuals from their reality, making them servile. The colonial educational system “should favor the formation of a man so foreign to his people that he could later become an instrument of colonial power for the domination of his brothers. Education was also entrusted with the training of cheap labor” (Buendía Gómez 1999, 19, personal translation).

Schools of Catholic and Protestant Portuguese missions conducted the education of the native Mozambican population (primarily black). At the religious schools, supported by the State, to which few people had access, students were required to assimilate the colonist's culture, leaving aside their cultural values and becoming Portuguese and Christian citizens (Hedges and Rocha 1999, 176-177). The colonial education system in Mozambique operated through social exclusion (Osório and Cruz e Silva 2008, 76) because it segregated the teaching and learning process between blacks and whites and established categories of assimilated and non-assimilated native blacks.<sup>1</sup> Education was an instrument of oppression that resulted in

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<sup>1</sup> Education separated non-assimilated Black people from whites and assimilated Black people.

the high illiteracy rates (above 90%) among the Mozambican population during the first years after independence (Mazula 1995; Buendía Gómez 1999; Osório et al. 2008; Castiano and Ngoenha 2013).

The only type of education to be given to the Africans was the one that would make them workers. The educational system aimed to "civilize"<sup>2</sup> and sustain the colony's economic and political goals. The political and philosophical conceptions of Black Africans were based on Enlightenment, ethnocentric, and patriarchal thinking that perceived Africans as primitive, not rational, and "subhuman" (Mazula 1995; Buendía Gómez 1999).

The founding of the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) in 1962 led to the Struggle for National Liberation from Portuguese colonial domination in 1964. The preparation for the struggle created the basis of the unity of the Mozambican people as a nation and the building of a new Mozambican education system. These education proposals resulted "from the urgencies of a people needing to deepen their national conscience and equip themselves with the appropriate means to continue their struggle for independence" (Buendía Gómez 1999, 91, personal translation).

With the victory and conquest of territory in Mozambique by FRELIMO (for whom education was a priority), the experiments and the first attempts carried out in the liberated areas (Mazula 1995, 104) helped build the notion of "Mozambicanity."<sup>3</sup> From there on, the embryo of the new school was born, whose intention was "to free independent Mozambican men ready to fight and overcome colonialism and build their homeland" (Buendía Gómez 1999, 92, personal translation). The national liberation struggle meant a violent political and cultural break from the colonial system, giving rise to an education system linked to the interests of Mozambicans, and focused on the tasks of national (re) construction.

With independence and the nationalization of education, schools were taken by the population as an expression of the affirmation of their power. Popular initiatives to open schools led to an unprecedented schooling explosion (Mazula 1995, 149). The situation in the first years after independence was critical due to the absence of qualified staff, resulting from the abandonment of white teachers from education institutions. There was no official education system at the time, school textbooks were outdated (they did not reflect the local reality), and the few vocational schools were in precarious conditions (Castiano and Ngoenha 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> The term should be understood as domestication or disciplinarization (in a sense academically attributed by Michel Foucault) of the bodies of Mozambican Black people to serve the regime.

<sup>3</sup> Concept refers to the construction of the Mozambican national identity, linked to the historical processes of struggle against colonialism (started in the 1960s), and to the collectively shared symbols and identity values.

These conditions challenged the FRELIMO government to conduct curricular reforms (teaching content, newly edited books) and administrative reforms (structures, school functioning, etc.) within a context of scarcity of resources. The construction of new schools and the training and hiring of teachers represented challenges to the new government (Castiano and Ngoenha 2013; Mazula 1995; Buendía Gómez 1999). The great concern of the new state was the policy of “massification” of schooling, including school-age children, adults, workers, peasants, women, young people, and the elderly. Access to education became everyone's task, a right, and a duty for all citizens (Castiano 2005). The materialization of these goals resulted in the creation of the single and centralized National Education System (SNE, 1983), directed by the first Ministry of Education and Culture, created in 1976. This system was intended to guarantee broad access to education, albeit in a context that inherited an elitist colonial system, far from managing the effects of school “massification.” The answer to how to massify without sufficient infrastructure and teachers capable of ensuring an adequate education could only be found in the political field, serving the nation's construction and the interests of liberators (Castiano 2005, 8).

The civil war (1977-1992), which opposed FRELIMO and the *Resistência Nacional de Moçambique* (RENAMO)<sup>4</sup>, constituted another obstacle to the construction of the SNE. The war destroyed many schools, raised the number of orphaned children, and the number of qualified teachers decimated. Money and time that could have been invested in education were instead spent in the process of struggle that sowed grief and opened wounds that, until today, have not healed among Mozambican people. The economic crisis of the 1980s, famine, and natural disasters were associated with the wars.

To make matters worse, Mozambique adhered to the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (IDB) in the late 1980s and early 1990s as an alternative to address the problems created by socialist political options. However, although adopted in the early years of independence, these policies imposed austerity and detrimental changes in the economic and political regimes. With the end of the war in 1992 and the introduction of the political power of multiparty democracy, the country became a signatory to the “elementary education policy for all,” which it is today.

At the semantic level, international policies had the same aim as earlier: guaranteeing all Mozambicans' education (Castiano 2005). Despite neoliberal political orientations that surged after post-independence socialist directions and added

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<sup>4</sup> RENAMO was started by the dictatorial regimes of Rhodesia and South Africa and found a popular base in Mozambique due to the authoritarian development policies imposed by Frelimo, especially in rural areas that clashed with the interests of local populations.



advances in the development of the SNE, the problems of expanding the school network, the quality of teaching, and the exclusion of a majority, among others, persisted. Children still cannot access this right, which should be essential for everyone: formal education. In the current political and economic regime that influences the market, the feeling of education as a source of profit tends to predominate, generating even more exclusion.

Among the population, girls continue to be the most disadvantaged. School infrastructures are precarious, and teacher training is lacking. Investments in education are low. Children continue to study under the trees, sitting on the ground. Schools lack piped water that is suitable for consumption. Bathrooms' conditions endanger the health of children and the entire school community. Sanitation is a significant challenge. Digital inclusion at libraries and laboratories for children and teachers is even more precarious. Overcrowded classrooms are another massive challenge for Mozambican elementary education. The pandemic worsens existing problems and difficulties and imposes new ones.

**Figure 1: A school on the outskirts of Maputo**



Source: Amâncio (2016)

### **The impacts of the pandemic on Mozambican elementary education**

The emergence of the new coronavirus pandemic radically changed the course of life worldwide, generating global alertness and the suspension of a large set of activities (Pleyes and Bringel 2020, 9). COVID-19 dramatically revealed the day-to-day

problems of social interactions, namely, social inequalities, the vulnerabilities of communities, and the precariousness of States in supplying essential services, such as health, education, water, sanitation, transportation, food, security, and internet access, among others. There is no guarantee of material living conditions.

In Mozambique, COVID-19 appears in a complex context, as the health crisis has joined the cyclical problems that have plagued the country since its constitution as an independent Nation-State: a nation with economic, political, and social situations and environmental disasters. These issues intensified with the hiring by private companies of “hidden debts” (2013-2014), which the State assumed due to the outbreak of political-military conflicts in the Central and Northern regions of the country (2013-2015; 2017-2020), and the impacts of the tropical cyclones Idai and Kenneth, which hit the Central and Northern Mozambique regions in April 2019.

A set of disasters caused by nature (and the action of government officials) caused environmental, human, and material impacts that led to the continuity of social, economic, cultural, and political instability (Manjoro et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the difficulties that the populations faced in the field of access to State policies for the promotion of well-being, health, minimum income, work, social security, and education.

Given the critical circumstances of the pandemic on a planetary scale, the Mozambican state announced immediate measures to mitigate the spread of the disease, calling on the population to abide by basic hygiene and safety guidelines and physical distance (although exceedingly difficult in the urban contexts of Mozambique). With the emergence of the first case of infection by COVID-19, officially announced on March 22, 2020, the State reinforced the country's protection by raising the alert level.

On March 30, 2020, the President of the Republic decreed, for the first time in the country's history, the State of Emergency (EE) throughout the national territory, with measures to spread the virus and protect the life and health of the public.<sup>5</sup> It included suspending classes in all public and private schools, from preschool to higher education. These measures raised controversies: on the one hand, some argued that SNE and public policies could be in danger of collapse. On the other hand, positions defended the correctness of risk-mitigation measures since life is the most asset and should be preserved. The controversy highlighted the impacts of the pandemic on the field of education. In addition to the shock of the abrupt suspension of activities,

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<sup>5</sup> Presidential Decree 11/2020 of 30 March.

society seemed to polarize in their versions of what to do within the scope of the policies in the health and education sectors.

The suspension of school activities directly affected the school community (students, their families, and teachers), therefore the basis of the SNE. This means that more than eight million students from different education subsystems, 14,000 schools, and 156,000 teachers suspended their activities, preventing table and meaningful contributions toward development (Ferrão et al. 2020).

As schools temporarily suspend their activities, we can ask ourselves: what did this mean for the reality of Mozambique? It told, among other things, that a large contingent of children delayed their entry into the school system in the coming years, with high consequences on the financial level and on the development of the country. The suspension of classes meant postponing the future of millions of Mozambican children, who mostly live in social vulnerability conditions and for whom the school is (although not for all) an opportunity for improvement and change.

In an economy already weakened by the state and its government's political options, the pandemic's impacts fell significantly on sectors related to societies, such as education. In this manner, the education sector suffers substantially when caregivers, for example, are not prepared to deal with children's education at home and deny parents the need to get involved in school instruction. To make matters worse, the pandemic left those responsible for the children with no alternative income exposed to economic struggles, the closure of companies, and the (temporary) impossibility of doing business for those working in the informal sector. The weight of the financial situation forced parents and caretakers to involve their children in economic and selling activities. Thus, in addition to having their classes suspended, impoverished children remained unprotected and had their lives put at risk.

Reflecting on the dilemma posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Mozambican philosopher António Xavier Tomo (2020, 13, personal translation) argued that “in fact, on the one hand, accepting to stay at home in the conditions of most African families and in a particular way Mozambicans means accepting to die of hunger and, on the other hand, denying to die of hunger and venturing out of the house in search of sustenance for the family is to accept to contract the virus and die.”

Not only did the pandemic pose severe problems for education, suspending activities in several African countries, but the measures themselves (in fact, some of them, such as staying at home) to mitigate the effects of the spread and infection by the virus, had adverse effects on the life of families, especially in survival strategies and direct impacts on children's education.



In the next section, we address the challenges and opportunities in elementary education facing this health crisis with severe social, economic, and political effects.

### **Challenges and opportunities of elementary education in the pandemic context and beyond**

There are several ways to look at the pandemic. Pessimists only view it as a problem that will further aggravate installed situations with no way out. Optimists, on the contrary, see it as a given opportunity for change. We think that it is necessary to balance these approaches. We recognize that the pandemic unveiled and worsened serious problems undermined but opened new challenges and opportunities for future changes. It is possible to think and implement other worlds and ways to improve, organize and conduct educational activities. It is in this direction that we intend to reflect in this section.

The pandemic-imposed urgency on new digital technologies in the field of education in Mozambique and Africa (Ferrão et al. 2020). The pandemic posed the issue of access to technological devices and the internet as a matter of citizenship rights. Within the scope of COVID-19, several educational institutions sought to replace face-to-face education with remote education, a model that did not have the desired effects in Mozambique since most children, their families, and even their teachers in urban contexts lacked the material conditions to conduct this model.<sup>6</sup>

The state did not supply adequate infrastructure for massive internet access or properly equipped schools (available only to large corporations, given their high cost). In addition to the difficulty of access by children and young people, and teachers themselves, to mobile phones and computers for Internet access, the only few who had access lacked the needed digital literacy that could supply the use of tools for adequate teaching and learning processes.

There is a relative consensus (with few exceptions) that “an effective materialization of the remote teaching option would need to be supported by adjustments in the technological apparatus of families, schools, in addition to the fact that the curriculum itself has to be punctual or widely re-adapted to respond to such a function fully” (Matsinhe, 2020: 3, personal translation).

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<sup>6</sup> Some schools, especially in urban contexts, adopted mixed models that combined the use of innovative technologies with the search for physical material in schools, developed by teachers for the exercise of students at home. The latter did not last long either, as it is known of the difficulties of the schools themselves in having available papers, computers, and printers to produce them and make them available in a brief period.

Training teachers capable of dealing with the new educational models (mixed) that combine classroom and remote education is essential. Because technological devices alone do not teach, committed teachers represent a medium to reach and acquire knowledge (Castiano 2020).

Investing in access to current information and communication technologies (ICTs) for the education of children and young people in Mozambique and Africa, in general, is a significant challenge that the State must take seriously, despite the alleged limitations on the ability to do so at national levels. At the same time, the globalization and dissemination of technologies are opportunities to put into practice new models of teaching and learning (Gasparetti 2001). These actions may consider the risk of outbreaks and phenomena like COVID-19 in the coming years, raising the need to require remote education activities. We recognize that globalization and dissemination of ICTs, especially in the field of culture and education, concede the promotion of critical and creative use of audio-visual media and information technology strategic processes (Barber 2004).

The dissemination and globalization of ICTs in Mozambique and the African continent will inevitably lead us to face the challenge of managing the globalization of culture through living with and learning in new fields of experience developed by the technologies of globalization or, on the contrary, with the deepening of the divide and the social exclusion that these technologies are already producing. Among the most severe challenges that this type of technology imposes on education, perhaps is that the children of the upper classes will be able to interact with “the new informational and communicative ecosystem” (Moraes 2003, 62, personal translation) from their own homes, while the children of the lower classes, without these possibilities, end up excluded from the new work and professional spaces that the technological culture will, or rather, is already configuring. This should be an important research field for the social sciences.

In addition to the challenges and opportunities that ICTs impose on education in the context of a pandemic, the latter places the demand for improving school infrastructure in a context of “phased return to school,” as called in Mozambique. States must ensure that schools have adequate rooms for teaching and learning. This is a real problem, as many children have classes outdoors, under a tree, in rooms without cover, or in a high degree of deterioration, running the risk of collapsing, as shown in the image below.

**Figure 2: - Escola 25 de Junho, in Beira, Mozambique, damaged during Cyclone Idai**



Source: ONU/Eskinder Debebe

The pandemic is an opportunity to rethink the conditions in which the educational process is carried out and to act to improve them also in access to water and soap (or ash); the sanitation of the school environment, where the bathrooms are often in inappropriate conditions for use due to the lack of water and cleaning products for proper cleaning, as well as in the rethinking of the forms of occupation of the spaces since the pandemic imposed the need for physical distance (Matsinhe 2020).

In this sense, the return to classes in the scope of primary education should also consist of prior guidance delivered to children and their families and in the forms of control of the prevention protocols needed on the school premises outside. In other words, the challenge of dealing with children at school in the context of a pandemic and the opportunity for children and adults too (re) learn together to deal with the situations imposed by this health crisis, for which the Mozambican State, through the Ministry of Education, must assume a significant role.

Restructuring school calendars and curricula is also a challenge and an opportunity for Mozambican elementary education. A challenge is that it requires a reallocation of financial and material resources to be distributed, aims and goals to achieve, and the design of the contents to take advantage of the learning process that the COVID-19 experience brought to children in this process. Therefore, equations and factors need to be in place while consistently placing first the fundamental right to life articulated with other conditions that make it possible, as well as protection is an ethical and moral obligation of the State.

## Conclusions

In this article, we address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Mozambican elementary education. Our central argument is the idea that it is necessary to balance approaches to the effects of the pandemic, which are not so pessimistic, nor so optimistic. In this sense, we recognize that the pandemic unravels and worsens the severe and old problems latent in the daily lives of Mozambicans. Still, it also opens new challenges and opportunities for necessary and creative ways of organizing and conducting educational activities.

The National Education System is a set of interdependent elements that form an organized whole to create a type of subject preconceived by it. In this logic, when some situation affects any part of the system, it changes the way the complete system works. This is what happened to education systems worldwide with the outbreak of COVID-19. This outbreak profoundly affected the economy and health, two fundamental fields for the full functioning of the educational sector. One of the immediate impacts of the pandemic on Mozambican education at all levels was the suspension of schooling, which meant that the system was paralyzed at the beginning of the pandemic, and the following up steps remained unclear.

The almost complete paralysis of the economy of African countries will condition investment in education in the coming years. And the impossibility of bringing many people together in the same spaces poses severe challenges to African educational systems and Mozambicans. The large contingent of students grows more annually, and such growth results in overcrowded classrooms, which, as a strategy to satisfy the education policy for all, does not work. Many children remained excluded from the teaching and learning process.

The pandemic challenges primary schools to improve sanitation and the conditions of their physical structures (classrooms and bathrooms, in particular). Many of these infrastructures are frightening to anyone who visits them because of the state in which they function before the pandemic of genuine offense to children's health and public health in general.

The pandemic imposes the urgency to virtualize education on the Mozambican education system and Africa. The country (and other similar countries) must create conditions so that access to the internet is possible for Mozambicans, especially students and teachers. This requires a significant economic investment in technological infrastructures, which in theory, is non-existent. The future of education will no longer be able to depend only on classroom classes; it is urgent to invest in technologies and,

simultaneously, in the training of teachers in the qualified use of these tools for teaching.

The pandemic's impacts on education and other areas must require assessment in the long term. The social sciences are the ones that are best positioned now to offer better political alternatives and based on consistent research, especially in countries such as Mozambique, where research in the field of natural sciences encounters barriers due to the lack of investment in innovative laboratories. The social sciences are the present and the future of Mozambique and African countries.

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