

How Tanzanian children deal with the COVID-19 crisis

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A survey (n=63) and interview study (n=15) with Tanzanian children inquired how they feel and what they know about the current situation.

Tanzania does not have an official shutdown; traffic continues with Tanzanians traveling to work and markets. International travel and large gatherings are forbidden, but the only shut institution is education; countrywide, schools closed on March 17, 2020.

Data from our small survey (n=63) and interview study (n=15) offer some insight into how Tanzanian children feel and what they know about the current situation. Among these children, there is great concern over missed education, with 81% very worried about missing classes and content and 50% thinking they will be unable to return to school. Around 85% of Tanzanian children attend primary school, but many fewer (around 34%) go on to and only 2% graduate from secondary school.¹

An 11-year-old boy was asked “what makes the situation difficult for you?” and remarked “not going to school to get an education.” This is a realistic fear because an interruption in schooling can be the end of one’s education.



Ill. 1: In Tanzania, traditional media serve as primary COVID-19 sources

Most of the Tanzanian children we studied are very worried. More than half believe they or their family members will get sick. Children are troubled about household situations, in terms of food and parents’ ability to work. More than half of children say their parents are very worried and a third indicate that their parents no longer go to work. Around 18% said it was difficult to buy food.

Media use among Tanzanian children consists mainly of traditional media, such as television, radio, and books. In a country of 58 million people, there are 44 million mobile phone subscribers. Most have simple mobile phones, only 38% of phones have internet access.² Very few Tanzanian children have phones. Airtime is a costly premium, electricity and the internet are unstable, so children rarely use social media or watch YouTube videos.

Traditional media serve as primary COVID-19 sources. Most (90%) of the Tanzanian children in our study say they are watching more TV now and 72% of children “totally agreed” with the statement that they use media to “know what is going on.” This is one of the highest percentages in the worldwide comparison (see also Götz

et al. in this issue). Two-thirds report that news media scares them, and 73% “totally agree” that media made for children could communicate information about COVID-19.

Children have a mix of knowledge; while some information is correct, misconceptions and myths exist. Practically all children in our study know that this is a new coronavirus and it originated in China;

most know who is at risk, and ways to protect oneself. However, a remarkable fraction (20%) of children think a foreign government spread COVID-19 as a weapon and 41% believe garlic could be preventative. Children have trouble discerning real versus fake news; few have media literacy skills nor the resources to compare information sources.

In Tanzania, the government controls all media. Official updates on COVID-19 cases and deaths have been rare; and many question what has been released. Additional questions surround the validity of imported tests, and officials are promoting herbal mixes as potential cures.³ Tanzania’s President Magufuli recommended citizens attend church and mosque services, suggesting that prayer “can vanquish” COVID-19. Children are hearing this message. When asked how people can protect themselves, a 12-year-old girl responded “pray, have faith and this crisis will disappear.”

NOTES

¹ <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/tz> [18.5.20]

² <https://www.statista.com/topics/1147/mobile-communications/> [18.5.20]

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/05/03/world/africa/03reuters-health-coronavirus-tanzania.html> [18.5.20]

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