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Building back better? The role of education sector responses in strengthening or eroding societal resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic

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COVID-19 laid bare many failings and shortcomings of state systems, institutions and structures which aim to protect citizens against harm. As observed from the outcomes of the pandemic in many parts of the Global South and Global North, the resilience of health, social protection, governance, economic, education, and social welfare systems has been significantly eroded or challenged, leaving large segments of the population open to heightened risk and vulnerability. This has been noted to have significantly eroded social capital, namely the trust, communication, and dialogue between citizens in the state as well as citizens with each other. Based on comparative research carried out on the return to schooling process in five countries, Lebanon, Nigeria, Colombia, Georgia, and Zambia, the paper highlights the important role and function that educational governance, decision-making, and control throughout the pandemic has played a key role in either maintaining or erode social capital, and ultimately the resilience of the entire education system. Much of this was based on how well state officials and local education officials both considered and communicated their actions to educators, students and their families. The importance of education as a site where both bridging and linking social capital is both strengthened, but also capitalized on is also discussed. Specifically, the paper highlights, using the example of COVID-19 education responses, how a state that is responsive and accountable to its citizenry in a time of crisis, stands the greatest chance of ensuring such periods do not lead to an erosion of social capital.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, resilience, social capital, social cohesion, education, crisis, conflict

1 Introduction

When COVID-19 surfaced in 2020, it very quickly impacted on nations around the world. As governments made decisions to lockdown society to protect public welfare and ensure health systems did not collapse, other systems, including education, had to pivot quickly to try to minimize loss in well-being and learning outcomes. What is clear is the capacity of such systems to do so greatly varied, and much of this depended on how structures, institutions, and mechanisms put in place pre-pandemic were able to be effectively leveraged in response

(see for example de Souza et al., 2022). In nations like the United Kingdom where health systems and response failed, there was clear erosion of public trust in state institutions. This simultaneously increased skepticism about the basis on which decisions were being made in the best interest of all segments of a population and, unfortunately, worsening outcomes for the most vulnerable populations (Borkowska and Laurence, 2021). Conversely, where citizens felt that the state was responsive to their needs and was making decisions in the best interest of all citizens, trust and confidence in the state was high leading to compliance with health measures but also perceived capacity to support well-being at the household and community level (Fernández-Prados et al., 2021). Social resilience was very much connected to the strength and capacity of state institutions to be responsive and adaptive to localized need, and with a clear intent to protect citizen well-being outcomes, including learning engagement (Razavi et al., 2020).

Education became a very visible manifestation of this, particularly around decision around school closures and reopening throughout the pandemic (Arroio, 2020). As the pandemic rapidly spread in early 2020, countries around the world moved to quickly shut schooling systems to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This decision, however, led to other consequences, particularly for rural and/or marginalized learners who were unable to engage in distance learning approaches, and lacking access to vital nutrition and health services which they would normally attain by attending school (see for instance Ahmed et al., 2020; Ozer and Eren Suna, 2020). Quickly the decision of when and how to re-open schools became a balancing act between managing the spread of the pandemic and supporting learning continuity for young people in light of growing educational inequities which emerged (Anna et al., 2022; Baxter et al., 2022).

While learners around the world have all returned to school by this point, there remains a need to learn from the pandemic and continue to "build back better" from its lingering impacts. We assert that a critical element of this is the imperative of restoring social capital and trust in public institutions which has been lost in many societies. This in turn has a mutual benefit in strengthening the resilience of education and other state institutions to future crises. To mount this argument, we begin by exploring conceptualizations of resilience, with specific attention to definitions which highlight the importance of transformative resilience as a vehicle for ensuring a move beyond the status quo. Alongside this, we review literature to date which signals the importance and contribution of social capital/ social cohesion to such forms of resilience, and how resilience—when it operates effectively—can mutually reinforce social capital/social cohesion. Particular attention is given to the role and function of education as a sector in both strengthening and reinforcing social cohesion in times of adversity; but also, how education relies on such social cohesion in times of crisis to maintain function and protect learners from adverse impacts.

In the second part of this paper, we provide examples of this based on research we led which tracked the process by which education systems responded to COVID-19 in five different contexts—Lebanon, Nigeria, Colombia, Georgia, and Zambia—in the first 18 months of the pandemic. Specifically, we focus on the ways in which relationships between state institutions, communities and learners were mediated through networks, alliances and structures which could communicate the demands and needs of those on the ground with the actors setting

important health and education policies. Where these mechanisms were both recognized and given prominence in the pandemic response, we observed education systems that were better poised to respond to and address the varying needs of learners; and likewise, communities more willing to accept and trust centralized decisions. Alongside this, transparent and responsive educational decision-making processes were seen to engender trust and confidence in public institutions, and conversely, where this was not the case, the opposite held true. Different to other studies which tracked decision-making processes and scenarios for school reopening, our intention is not to compare public health responses, learning inequities or learning loss *per se*, but rather how such processes served to either erode or reinforce social cohesion. The implications of our analysis for building back better in response to a crisis like COVID-19 are discussed in the final section.

2 Setting up the argument

In this section we outline how we understand and articulate the concept of resilience throughout the remainder of the paper, before then reviewing existing literature on the interrelationships which exist between social cohesion, resilience and education provision in times of conflict and crisis.

2.1 What does it mean to build back better through the language of resilience?

Resilience is an often used, but poorly understood, concept used across the development community and the education community more specifically. It has been taken up because of its ability to help frame problems within a systems-focused approach and with a multi-scalar lens (Béné et al., 2016). Additionally, it can engender multi-sectoral collaboration which can bring together practitioners, policy makers and organizations under a common "chapeau." With the SDGs, resilience has become an explicit outcome of development actions. For example, SDG target 1.5 aspires to: "By 2030 build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters." Resilience also features in several other targets, including targets 13.1, 9.1, 11.5, and 11.b.[1] Its appearance in the SDGs comes out of recognition that the "multiplicity of risks and vulnerabilities faced by people and communities, now and in the future, needs to be addressed," if meaningful development gains are to be enjoyed and sustained for all (Bahadur et al., 2015, p. 2). Specific to the education sector, resilience has increased in its prominence as a feature or outcome of programming, particularly since 2010. It has become an important element of the overall goal and strategy for an increasingly

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1   These targets are associated with goals such as combating climate change and its impacts (Goal 13), building resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation (Goal 9), make cities human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (Goal 11). The specific language of each target can be found at https://sdgs.un.org/goals.

collaborative and cross-sectoral approach to education in emergencies programming, particularly in response to the intersecting challenges which climate change, natural disasters, conflict and inequality pose to delivering quality education to all (Shah et al., 2020).

Yet, this increased utilization of resilience has not come without criticism from other scholars, who on one hand have seen it as a vehicle for individualizing blame and responsibility for development failures, and on the other, removing the agency of individuals to impact on social systems (Coulthard, 2012). Alongside this, resilience is often framed in development discourse as a normative objective to be aimed for, rather than recognizing that in some cases, manifestations of resilience can be maladaptive responses taken at an individual, household or community level as living conditions deteriorate (Mahdiani and Ungar, 2021). Resultingly, other scholars have argued that the emergence of resilience discourse in international development reflects an extension of neoliberal governmentality (Joseph, 2018). Resilience becomes a discursive technology and tool used to get individuals to accept uncertainty and risk and to live with and thrive in the uncertainty of their existence, effectively distancing those with the power to govern from the governed subjects (O'Malley, 2010; Shah, 2015). These governed subjects must become ever more resilient but without any concomitant structural changes. The SDG 1.5 target mentioned above is susceptible to this critique, calling as it does for the "poor and those in vulnerable situations" to become ever more resilient without drawing attention to the causes of their poverty and vulnerability.

Increasingly, however, there is acknowledgement that resilience is a process rather than an end goal. This is a point made explicit in a separate white paper for USAID, written by one of the authors (see Shah, 2019). This paper identifies that resilience is not a disposition or trait, but rather types of assets, skills, knowledge, resources, and networks which are used to anticipate and deal with the consequences of shocks or stressors in a way that reduces their overall impacts (Béné et al., 2012, 2016; Béné, 2018; Diwakar and Shepherd, 2018). Capacities are pathways through which resilience manifests by acting to counterbalance exposure and sensitivity (and ensuing vulnerability) to a range of risk factors. These capacities take three forms:

- Absorptive resilience capacities – The ability of individuals, households, communities or institutions to minimize exposure and sensitivity to shocks and stresses through preventative measures and appropriate coping strategies to avoid permanent, negative impacts.
- Adaptive resilience capacities – The ability of an individual, household, or communities or institutions to make informed choices and changes in livelihood and other strategies in response to longer-term social, economic and environmental change.
- Transformative resilience capacities – The ability of communities and institutions, through governance mechanisms, policies and regulations, cultural and gender norms, community networks, and formal and informal social protection mechanisms to establish an enabling environment for systemic change.

On a spectrum, absorptive capacities are deployed to address the consequences of shocks and stressors, adaptive capacities are used in anticipation of future shocks, and transformative capacities are developed to address underlying vulnerabilities to these shocks and stressors (Béné, 2018; Vaughan, 2018).

There is growing advocacy for the strengthening of transformative resilience capacities to be prioritized within development programs, as part of a desire to both reduce long-term need for recurrent humanitarian aid/support and straddle the humanitarian-development nexus and ensure more sustainable paths to recovery after crises (USAID, 2012; European Commission, 2014). Within the education sector this is increasingly visible in guidance produced by agencies like IIEP-UNESCO (2015), the World Bank (see Reyes, 2013; Reyes et al., 2013) and USAID (Shah, 2019).

Meanwhile, it is acknowledged that the resilience of a system depends on more than the sum of the capacities of the individuals, communities and institutions which constitute it. Resilience includes the connectors within the system linking distinct levels together through mechanisms of governance, coordination, communication, and partnership (Vaughan, 2018). In this way, resilience of a system is molded, not only by varying capacities at each level, but also existing structures, assets, and processes which foster relationships and networks at and between the various levels. These are known as "conversion factors."

2.2 The role of social capital and its relationship to education system governance

An important conversion factor to enable resilience capacities to translate towards responses which protect societies against sudden shocks and ongoing stressors is social capital. Social capital can be understood as comprised of productive relationships of trust, reciprocity, and obligation: (1) between individuals within communities, known as bonding social capital; (2) across communities, known as bridging social capital; and (3) communities and the state and its institutions, known as linking social capital (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001). Research has found quite clearly that the ability of individuals, communities, institutions, and systems to absorb shocks and stressors and adapt to and/or transform context of adversity is enabled and constrained by bridging, bonding, and linking social capital (Fazey et al., 2007; Béné et al., 2012; Varela et al., 2013; Ungar, 2018). According to Bahadur et al. (2010) resilient systems require, amongst other factors:

- A high level of diversity, where different voices are included in resilience-building policy processes;
- Effective governance and institutions which focus on strengthening linking and bridging social capital. This typically necessitates decentralized, flexible governance structures which are connected to local realities; and.
- Importance given to social values and structures, recognizing that high levels of bonding social capital can lead to greater cooperation between individuals in a community and a stronger commitment to supporting equitable outcomes for all.

At a localized level, this requires formalized structures which encourage and strengthen engagement with diverse groups of community level stakeholders (including parents, community/religious leaders, educators) and which are founded on strong leadership and public accountability (Colleta and Cullen, 2000). In times of crisis, it is often these entities which can act as an important

conduit for connecting citizens to each other, alongside decentralized state decision-making institutions. In doing so, it can serve to maintain trust, confidence, and two-way communication around matters of public welfare and safety. Emerging evidence from COVID-19 responses in other sectors—notably health—already suggests this to be true, but for education the evidence based to date on this remains thin (see Bartscher et al., 2021; Villalonga-Olives et al., 2021; Fraser et al., 2022).

Our focus on education as a site of fostering resilience and social capital stems from the very genesis of mass schooling, where a key function was to establish a social contract between citizens and the state (Baker, 2014). This social contract posits that the state provides some level of security, order and rule of law to all its citizens, and in return, where citizens must compromise on some of their individual rights and obey the rules set forth. Through mass schooling this tacit agreement is socialized directly to students through the curriculum and indirectly to their parents/caregivers through the edict of universal and compulsory education. Over time, mass schooling became a key institution where the state's commitments towards protecting its citizens, providing a basic level of services, and offering opportunities for participation is made visible or not (Marshall, 1950). For example, institutionalized public schooling is seen as a key mechanism where students and their households come into contact with divergent views, perspectives and experiences from across the wider community, participate and engage with the state and state-officials (i.e., teachers, school leaders and others), and a conduit through which other services like health, protection and social welfare can be provided by the state. When citizens see this social contract in formal schooling structures, systems and institutions operating effectively, it can serve an important function in strengthening both bridging and linking social capital (Heyneman, 2000).

Importantly, in times of crisis, these functions are oftentimes tested. How the state responds to the crises itself is a product of the strength of existing stocks of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, and the degree to which the state is able to use these effectively to support responses which maximize the well-being of all. Often, however, social capital is eroded in times of crisis by:

- A lack of transparency or exclusion within political decision making processes;
- The perpetuation of identity, ethnic, class or religious-based divisions due to the lack of equitable access to social services, inequitable or inaccessible social service provision;
- The inability of state mechanisms to appropriately guard against and respond to violence; and
- The inability of the state to respond to shifts in social service demand caused by displacement and migration (Shah et al., 2016).

One clear example we have of this is the way that health systems in West Africa responded to the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) outbreak in 2013–2014 and the impacts it subsequently had on education systems. In Liberia, for example, the lack of capacity to respond in a timely fashion and protect citizens from needless death, negatively affecting Liberians' perceptions of their own government and its public workers, and depleted overall trust in government institutions, including education. Because of weakened trust in government decision-making and public institutions, there was a lack of confidence in communities when schools finally did reopen, 7 months after they were shut. Health and safety protocols, such as supplying large amounts of chlorine to each school and having each school create an isolation room, created increased anxiety amongst parents that schools were in fact not safe (Santos and Novelli, 2017). Sierra Leone faced a similar predicament where "a historically entrenched and pervasive disconnection between the...state and its citizens" manifested itself acutely during EVD (Novelli and Higgins, 2017, p. 33). There, education became a site of further grievance between citizens and the state, undermining what little social capital existed at that time. In the aftermath of EVD, the system had reduced resilience capacities to support a timely return to learning, because of this lack of public trust and confidence.

The recent COVID-19 global pandemic allowed us to explore education system resiliency and its relationship to social capital at much greater scale. In the remainder of this article, we draw from evidence collected as part of separate case studies documenting the return to learning process in five diverse country contexts, and through a process of thematic analysis and comparison across these cases, investigate these dynamics further.

3 Methodology

This section outlines the approach by which the research presented in this paper was carried out. It is divided up into the context for the study, the rationale for specific country selection, data collection and analysis approaches, and key limitations of this methodology.

3.1 Context for the study

In October 2020, USAID's Office of Education commissioned a team of researchers to examine, describe, and analyze the processes and decisions made by education system actors in response to COVID-19 across five different country contexts between March 2020 and April 2021. A key focus was to explore how decisions about processes of learning continuity and school reopening were made, how this was reflective of pre-existing capacities within the system, and what this indicated about wider education sector resilience in the country.

3.2 Selection of case studies

At the outset, a total of 14 countries were identified for possible inclusion in the research by USAID, and from this the research team narrowed it down to five.

In narrowing this list of countries of focus, five key criteria were considered, and the 14 countries classified along each. These were:

- Resilience to crisis and school closure: Past experience with health crisis or crisis in which schools closed at scale for protracted period;
- Return to Learning Status: Schools had re-opened, were currently open, and/or where funding was allocated or provided for the return to learning process;

- Context vulnerability: Nature and presence of existing shocks and stressors, such as refugee crisis, ongoing conflict, or economic instability;
- Income level classification based on GDP *per capita*;
- Geographic spread to ensure inclusion across the regions of the world in which USAID operates;

From these, five countries—Nigeria, Colombia, Zambia, Georgia and Lebanon—were selected for inclusion in this study. For example, of the potential locations in Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria was identified for inclusion in this research due to its status as a lower-middle income country, its recurring instances of violence in the north, and its previous experience responding to a wide-spread health crisis, namely Ebola in 2015. Lebanon and Nigeria were selected as complementary examples in terms of their similarly multi-risk contexts and lower-middle income status, but distinct from each other in terms of geography and geopolitics. On the other hand, Colombia and Georgia were selected as contrasting each other. Colombia selected because of its upper-middle income status with experience dealing with natural hazards and an ongoing refugee influx, while Georgia, too, had an upper middle-income status but with lesser exposure to ongoing shocks.

3.3 Data collection approaches

Following selection of countries, the research team conducted a comprehensive desk review which included gathering a range of resources. These included: (a) reports on education during the pandemic school closures; (b) frameworks published by international agencies on education sector responses to COVID-19; (c) government plans drafted and decreed as official response to COVID-19 (specifically in the education sector) for each of the countries; and (d) situation analyses of access to education during school closure in each of the study countries. At this point, additional areas (geographical or thematic) of focus were considered for certain contexts. For example, it was determined that non-formal education would be explored in Lebanon to understand the dynamics of that section of the education sector; northern states would be explored to understand the return to learning process in a multi-hazard context in Nigeria; and the conditions of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia would be explored to understand issues of inclusion and equity.

The third phase centered on periodic key informant interviews across the education sector. These included government agencies, NGOs, donor agencies, civil society organizations, University faculty, and the private sector. Interviews were conducted across four 'waves' of research. After each wave, the research teams – constituted by researchers at both national and international levels – jointly analyzed emerging findings and recalibrated the research questions and sample set for subsequent waves through an inductive approach which moved from identifying codes and categories into wider themes. Because the research was occurring in real-time as the pandemic continued to impact on the education system, this multi-wave, longitudinal approach offered opportunities to trace themes and phenomena over time and as the context itself changed, and in some cases speak to the same key informant multiple times as the situation with COVID-19 shifted (Auduly et al., 2022). Key questions which these stakeholders were asked are noted in respective country reports that have since

been published (see Andguladze and Flemming, 2021; Chinnery and Akar, 2021; Flemming and Mwaanga, 2021; Heaner et al., 2021; Heaner and Restrepo-Saenz, 2021). In total, 234 interviews were conducted across the five contexts (see Table 1).

3.4 Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed. Initially, case study reports from this research were produced. These provide a more descriptive overview of the processes by which each of the five countries had gone about making decisions about opening/closing schools during the pandemic and how they sought to support learning continuity throughout this period. As part of this, the wider socio-political contexts as well as educational apparatus, including systems of education governance and decision-making were also considered. The analysis presented in this paper is a thematic, secondary synthesis, of the primary data gathered and presented in the discrete country reports. It was done by firstly exploring descriptive themes across each of the reports to identify similarities and differences in findings. This was then followed by development of analytical themes to generate a series of new interpretive constructs and explanations to understand similarities and differences in the data (Mishra and Dey, 2022). This comparative case study approach was used to compare how a phenomenon—in this case mechanisms of localized vs. centralized decision-making as well as communication between school-based actors and education authorities—provides insights about social cohesion through education across distinct social locations (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2014). By doing so, it allowed us to test and validate an emerging theory about resilience and social capital across these sites. From this approach, the issue of education sector responses to COVID-19 being seen as an important element of maintaining/ strengthening trust of citizens in the state and/or undermining this emerged.

Importantly, this is a qualitative study in the social constructivist epistemology where meaning was generated inductively rather than deductively. A hypothesis was not established *a priori*, and rather, the key themes and findings emerged out of the data generated. The intention was to understand how stakeholders understood, rationalized and experienced the processes of returning to learning during COVID-19, and to then situate and interpret this in the wider context.[2] Hence, concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are more appropriate to gauge the trustworthiness of the findings reached—rather than its reliability, validity and replicability which are common benchmarks in the positivist tradition (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In this study, credibility and transferability were achieved through ongoing discussions within the research team, as well as use of successive rounds of interviews to explore and validate emerging themes and issues. Dependability and confirmability were achieved by substantiating all findings in relation to policy texts, other literature, and use of theory as an explanatory frame for findings. As

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2 Direct quotes, statistics and other information are used in the remainder of this article and sometimes without citation. This is because they come from separately published country reports which are available at https://www.eccnetwork.net/resources/resilience-return-learning-case-studies.

TABLE 1 Summary of respondents interviewed.

	Colombia	Georgia	Lebanon	Nigeria	Zambia	Total
Government officials	14	22	14	8	6	64
Donors	2	3	9	5	4	23
UN or World Bank	1	2				3
International and local NGOs	7	8	9	7	13	46
Civil society	12	8		5	5	22
Private sector education actors	5			3		8
Principals, teachers		14	38			52
Total	43	57	70	27	37	234

an inductive, qualitative study, the intention is not for the same research design or approach to be replicable or generalizable across all contexts, but rather to account for the contingency of space, time, and place in which this research occurred.

3.5 Limitations

It is important to note that there are several limitations with the data used in this research. Firstly, in some contexts government documentation either did not exist or was extremely difficult to obtain in a timely manner. This was particularly true in more decentralized contexts. In Nigeria, for example, while a national policy for return to learning was made widely available, state-level policies were not so easily obtained. Similarly, in Colombia, national guidelines were available, but all written plans for school reopening and closure were made at the school and *Secretaría* (district) level, which required establishing contacts with individuals at those levels in order to learn about the specifics of such plans. In contrast, in both Zambia and Georgia a national strategy was widely available and applied across regions and was, thus, there was less effort needed to explore local applications of centrally derived policies. Secondly, the research is heavily skewed towards the perspectives of government stakeholders/ actors, civil society representatives, and donors with less of a view from education or community stakeholders on the ground. This was an intentional decision in part, based on the focus of the initial research of school reopening processes. For this paper, however, it is acknowledged that having more of a perspective from teachers, learners and parents would have been helpful to understand how such decisions were viewed by the most local of education stakeholders. In contexts like Georgia and Colombia, where a number of these individuals were interviewed, it provided a more nuanced and triangulated set of insights into vertical social cohesion, and specifically how trust was strengthened or undermined by the state's ability to respond to localized concerns and grievances. Lastly, while the case studies explored the ways in which national governments and education ministries responded to COVID-19, it was necessary to focus on individual regions within some countries particularly where the education system is highly devolved, or where there are vast contextual differences from region to region. In choosing regions, selection was purposive based on understanding the interrelationship between an acute shock (COVID-19) and ongoing stressors facing society. For instance, in Nigeria, the case study focuses on Northern states where the pandemic intersects with longer-standing stressors

such as insurgency and conflict. In Colombia individual *Secretarías* were selected to explore how each exercised their autonomy against the backdrop pf other natural disasters and the ongoing influx of migrants from Venezuela. Hence all country case studies were conducted within the context of the national plans and processes for return to learning—but with the caveat that they were not intended to be nationally representative.

4 Key findings

4.1 Systems and structures of education governance: what impact did it have?

Our analysis suggests that existing systems of educational governance—and particularly the degree to which decision-making was either centralized or decentralized—either hindered or supported transparent, needs-based decision-making which was deemed timely and relevant to specific communities. [3] Broadly speaking, it was found that decentralized decision-making and action around supporting learning during/after school closures, allowed for more timely and relevant responses, but only if they were also supported by institutional structures that could act on locally identified needs.

In all countries, the first responses to COVID-19 were sweeping universal school closures and the rapid deployment of national emergency (distance) education measures. However, as it became clear that certain populations of learners did not have capacity to engage with the platforms provided, localized actions, where permitted, provided some additional opportunity for marginalized learners to engage with schooling. For example, radio coverage in both Nigeria and Zambia was limited, with radio ownership at only 71 percent of urban and 52 percent of rural households in Nigeria, and only 40 percent of urban and 34 percent of rural households in Zambia (Flemming and Mwaanga, 2021; Heaner et al., 2021). Additionally, although learners could access radio programming, they were reported to require additional instructional support to do so,

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3   See the individual case study reports for a full description of the structures of educational governance that were already in place at the time that the pandemic hit in 2020 (Andguladze and Flemming, 2021; Chinnery and Akar, 2021; Flemming and Mwaanga, 2021; Heaner et al., 2021; Heaner and Restrepo-Saenz, 2021).

clearly limiting the broader potential of this response. To respond, in Northeast Nigeria the state education boards in Adamawa, Sokoto, and Borno states—with INGO support—established community-based learning centers supporting learners to jointly listen to the radio programming as it aired, with supplemental support provided by paid facilitators (Heaner et al., 2021, p. 20). In Zambia, however, and despite awareness of the challenges posed by distance learning modalities, no specific immediate liberties for localized responses were granted. Instead, national education actors emphasized the readiness of schools to reopen safely. A national assessment of both distance learning engagement and school readiness led to clear recommendations by civil society and I/NGOs to reopen in-person learning as soon as it was determined safe to do so (Flemming and Mwaanga, 2021, p. 10).

Additionally, mechanisms for local communities, particularly teachers, learners, and their families, to provide feedback to decision-makers—and for these decision-makers to tailor responses to these localized needs—also varied. In Georgia, upon receiving community feedback on limited access to Microsoft Teams, which was the only distance learning platform originally sanctioned by MOs, the Ministry allowed use of other online platforms in distance education programming to increase access. Similarly, ongoing monitoring efforts conducted by the decentralized educational resource centers helped to continuously feed data on learning engagement/participation from schools into central government responses which, in turn, ensured that policymakers were well attuned to the diversity of circumstances on the ground (Andguladze and Flemming, 2021, p. 15). In Lebanon, where no such mechanisms for monitoring existed—and in a context where the Ministry of Education was overwhelmed with the need to respond to multiple other stressors and shocks beyond COVID-19—teachers and learners quickly deployed their own strategies by engaging other, more familiar platforms which require less bandwidth such as WhatsApp. This was despite the Ministry pushing use of its official platforms on most schools (Chinnery and Akar, 2021, p. 10).

Following initial school closures, plans were then drafted nationally for the return to in-person learning. These national level plans differed in the degree to which they mandated actions for all of the education sector, or, more simply provided broad guidance to be applied by autonomous regional education offices or individual schools. For example, the Colombia case study demonstrates that in the highly devolved education system of Colombia, the Ministry of Education established a set of guidelines around a national education reopening plan but left it to individual *Secretarías* (district-level offices) to come up with their own plans and protocols that were aligned with these guidelines. In developing the plan, the educational *Secretaría* consulted with the corresponding health *Secretaría*, considering data related to COVID-19 prevalence in the region, alongside school and community capacities to adhere to masking, hygiene and staggered opening regimes. With the Moe's approval of the *Secretaría's* plan, each school would then present their individual protocols to the *Secretaría*; when the protocol was approved, schools were deemed ready to return to in-person classes. To support these decentralized processes, the MoE published a toolkit with tools to assist reopening of schools. Each of these tools included content from UNICEF and other entities, along with the national protocols (Heaner and Restrepo-Saenz, 2021, pp. 24–25).

During the response, the government of Colombia also leveraged an existing model of cooperation across *Secretarías*– the G20—to support the development of contextually relevant and technically effective plans. The G20 consisted of a large group of Moe personnel in working groups supporting the 96 *Secretarías* to provide customized assistance. The working group facilitated spaces of co-creation and sharing amongst *Secretarías*, fostering a healthy competition to see which *Secretaría* would open first and nudging some *Secretarías* to implement good practices that were working for others (*Ibid*, 25).

In Nigeria, the two-level system saw the Federal Ministry set guidelines, with states then required to craft their own specific plans. Unlike Colombia, however, there was no evidence of the central government supporting state authorities to develop such plans, which meant that in many cases, these plans failed to eventuate (Heaner et al., 2021, pp. 15–16). In Lebanon's highly centralized system, all decisions regarding school closure —for both public and private schools— were mandated at a national level, with no school level autonomy to determine whether, how and when to close or re-open. As of April 2021, limited guidance had been received at a school level on how to effectively manage the reopening process. An early version of the Ministry's Back to Learning Plan had been shared with sector partners in July 2020 but, lacking in this plan, was specific detail about how to realize the plan at a school level, or how such plans could vary from school to school based on needs or circumstances of specific groups of learners (Chinnery and Akar, 2021, p. 26).

In sum, the way in which decision-making and action were deployed during COVID-19 played an important role in ensuring both learning continuity and engendering confidence and trust in government actions throughout the crisis. For instance, the Georgia case study shows that, throughout the pandemic, there were many instances where the Ministry consulted with schools before making certain decisions, gave schools a choice of response strategies, or left decisions to schools entirely. The initial options for both schedule and modalities (in-person shifts, online only, hybrid) were crafted by MOs, which then mandated schools to choose the option most appropriate to their context. Similarly, when teachers and parents expressed increasing concern about student formative assessment, the MoES developed assessment policy options that schools could choose from to apply across the entire school or to individual students. Such autonomy was novel but necessary to address localized concerns. One school principal in a rural Georgian school noted that "*I have never felt so much professional freedom in my career as a school principal*." Two government officials interviewed for this study described the increased decision-making and leadership initiative among school principals as extremely positive and helped to redress a traditional lack of transparency and trust between citizens and the state (Andguladze and Flemming, 2021, p. 28).

4.2 The importance of communication and coordination to respond to localized needs and concerns: balancing community and teacher demands

As the above section highlights, the capacity of governments to acknowledge the uneven impacts of COVID-19 on communities, identify their needs, and respond appropriately relied on ensuring there were mechanisms in place to grant autonomy and control to localized bodies. Simultaneously, there was a critical need to ensure

that the needs and issues identified locally were supported and responded to centrally in a timely fashion.

From the outset of the global pandemic in 2020, there was strongly public concern over both the health and safety of learners, teachers, and other school staff, as well as the impacts of learners being out of school for too long. Responses to COVID-19 has demanded education systems maintain (or gain) public trust for the safety of children from exposure to COVID-19, while simultaneously make plans to return to in-person learning to avoid learning loss and significant educational disruption (Carvalho et al., 2020; Benzian et al., 2021; Sauer et al., 2021).

Across all case study contexts during 2020, there was a notable focus on hygiene, physical distancing, health protocols and response mechanisms as part of the school re-opening process. Research and analysis conducted since has demonstrated how schools could in fact safely reopen, and minimize learning loss, as long as appropriate health protocols in place (Anna et al., 2022). But importantly, this emphasis on school readiness and compliance with health protocols was described as critical to assuring parental trust in the state was not lost once children returned to school.

As one government official in Zambia identified:

> "We worked hard at the Ministry level because we knew that when parents take their children to school, they are entrusting us to keep them safe. We worked hard to assure this and communicated to them specifically to 'please bring your children, we are ready and will take care of them'… We saw a positive response [i.e. learners returned]. We knew that they had their trust [in us] and so the health guidelines remain a priority for schools" (Andguladze and Flemming, 2021, p. 25).

Examples also emerged from our research, of where the school reopening process provided an opportunity for governments to be seen as responsive to citizen demands and in doing so gain public trust more broadly. For example, in Georgia, the government's response—from the closures of schools and businesses to official strategies for reopening—were perceived positively by the majority of the public throughout the crisis (Andguladze and Flemming, 2021). Some of this is attributable to how the government established new mechanisms for it to both communicate with and receive feedback from parents, community leaders and education personnel to the Ministry of Education using Facebook Messenger and other social media platforms. The Ministry assigned three full time personnel from the public relations department throughout the pandemic to engage with parents and caregivers. As one member of this team described,

> "We used Facebook before [COVID-19] but now we have no day off. This is where parents spend most of their time, it is more convenient for them. We do not respond after midnight but other than that we are online responding to the posts and questions in the inbox. We try not to refer them to other agencies. We contact other departments and agencies to get answers and then respond to the questions ourselves. We have a hotline too, but Facebook is our spine and power" (Ibid, 31).

These new mechanisms, as well as a willingness from senior management in the Ministry of Education to respond and adapt action based on that feedback, offered opportunity for both more effective policy and practice, and a deeper sense of trust in state institutions from the public in Georgia. This is reflected, for instance in opinion polling which suggests that the public perceived public institutions much more favorably during COVID-19, compared to pre-COVID periods (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2020).

4.3 Responding from the bottom up: new forms of bridging and bonding capital

As society urged schools to reopen, there was pushback from teachers and school officials to such action. They expressed concern that reopening schools—even with biosafety measures in place—may increase COVID-19 transmission and subsequently risk the health of teachers, students, and those in the school community. In many ways teachers became front line actors in mediating a tension between what the state thought it needed to do to be responsive to citizen demand, and local realities which might dictate otherwise. In Colombia, it led to teachers' unions vocally opposing government decisions to return students to school before the pandemic had been effectively managed through vaccination programmed. Their concerns reinforced widespread community-level concerns about children returning to school and contracting the virus, despite the evidence suggesting that the risks to children being out of school was greater. In the end, it led to the government delaying school reopening plans, or allowing individual families to opt in/out of sending their child back to school (Heaner and Restrepo-Saenz, 2021, p. 21). Similar to other crisis, teachers' responses and actions in support of, or opposition to state decisions inspired either confidence or distrust in these decision-making processes (see for example Lopes Cardozo and Shah, 2016).

At the same time, teachers faced sizeable expectations from both parents and education authorities to support learner engagement and well-being, and the prevention of learning loss. Unfortunately, in many contexts, they were often poorly/unsupported in addressing this concern and resorted to their own measures in the absence of state support. Teachers in Georgia mobilized Facebook groups to support each other, with quick and interactive means of communication and sharing lessons learned in real time. These groups emerged to discuss new policies and issues for their classrooms during COVID-19, and to share pedagogical ideas and solutions. The groups engendered a new culture of trust and collaboration amongst teachers nationally, as described by one respondent:

> "[Before the pandemic] it was very uncommon for teachers to share something of their own with other teachers. They seemed to be afraid of feedback…this was a clear sign of the lack of trust among teachers; they would hide their own findings from each other. Now the space has opened; if a teacher finds something that works, they want others to use it too" (Andguladze and Flemming, 2021, p. 29).

One Facebook group which had only 300 members prior to COVID-19 amassed over 30,000 members across 2020. As teachers navigated the challenges of distance learning and eventual return to in-person learning, these responsive informal networks offered rapid and personalized support. In Georgia, they helped to strengthen bonding and bridging social capital—bringing teachers together both within and across disparate communities across the country.

Many of these endogenous responses, though, emerged due to a lack of localized confidence in national decision-making and a sense that policies and guidance set from "above" gave too little credence to local realities. For example, teachers in Lebanon independently sought their own distance learning mechanisms when the national online strategy did not meet their own or their learners' needs (Chinnery and Akar, 2021). In Colombia, when the return to in-person school began, teachers were expected to alternate teaching both online classes and in-person classes. In the absence of specific national guidance on this, a teacher in Colombia wondered "*how to integrate curriculums or study plans when there are two groups of students (in-person and online) carrying out different processes but with the same number of teachers?*" (Heaner and Restrepo-Saenz, 2021, p. 23).

By mid-2021, it was clear that the strain on teachers for ensuring teaching and learning had been both underestimated due to both the ongoing unpredictability and uncertainty caused by prolonged pandemic related lockdowns. This resulted in teachers feeling exhausted, and in many contexts, under supported (Beames et al., 2021; Education Review Office, 2021; Cohen and Willemsen, 2022). As a significant group of civil service actors, the sense of feeling abandoned by the state is not something to be ignored—and signaled the beginnings of wider spread distrust in state decision-making around COVID-19 related lockdowns which started to emerge at this time. Increasing protests from teachers' unions and civil society at this time were often a symptom of wider fissures in the initial trust and confidence which citizens had held in state actions and management of the pandemic (see Ipsos, 2020; Straus, 2020; Lewis and Morgan, 2021).

4.4 Schools as vital outposts of the state throughout the pandemic

Throughout COVID-19, schools remained a very visible outcrop as localized institution of the state in communities. Across all the case studies, educational institutions or educational personnel acted as important conduits and hubs for communicating public health messages, supporting vaccination campaigns, and ensuring children's welfare was maintained. Local schools often became symbols of the state's level of care and response for its citizens in the midst of a pandemic. In Zambia, Georgia, and Colombia to an extent, respondents from Ministries of Education emphasized the critical responsibility that, thus, befell education actors, particularly at the localized levels.

As one of the informants from an INGO that operates in Cúcuta, Colombia remarked, "*in rural areas the school has a value beyond the classes… the role of the teacher is that of a community leader who summons everyone in the community around the dynamics of the school.*" During COVID-19 closures, it became increasingly clear that schools were indispensable to communities. Schools across Colombia were not just hubs for teaching and learning, but also for community meetings, delivery of other social services (e.g., meal plans), vaccine distribution, networking between local officials, and spaces where children and youth find refuge and caring adults. According to one key informant in Colombia, if the national government and other stakeholders had recognized this, truly, then "*they (schools) would not have been the first to close and the last to reopen*" (Heaner and Restrepo-Saenz, 2021, pp. 27–28).

Interestingly, in Colombia, it was civil society organizations who served as conduits of connection and information between communities, schools and central authorities. Local *Secretaries* lacked official data and information from the central Ministry of Education on the situation on the ground, in terms of numbers of students returning to schools, as well as the number of schools in a particular location which had in fact chosen to reopen. One civil society organization began to both actively petition the government to release this information and then to publish this information on social media, and eventually a public website. In the end, these localized educational authorities relied on information which civil society organizations actively sought from the Ministry of Education to make decision-making, which then assisted them to be perceived as responsive and adaptable to community needs. Irrespective though, such actions maintained some level of public trust and confidence in government decision-making and ensured linking social capital was not eroded during the pandemic (Heaner and Restrepo-Saenz, 2021).

5 Discussion: where to from here?

Nonetheless, the longer-lasting impacts of COVID-19 on social capital remain an acute concern globally. Research suggests that most citizens now see the societies they live in as more divided than prior to the pandemic, and that citizens' satisfaction and trust in the state has become increasingly polarized along political and partisan lines (Silver and Connaughton, 2022). Much of this is attributed to citizen views that government decision-making processes were often done opaquely, with little concern for long-term welfare and livelihoods, and in ways that have further entrenched inequalities (Baulk and McKay, 2022). The long-term consequences of this are increasing social, economic and political fragmentation and the further weakening of bridging, bonding and linking social capital which are critical conversion factors in supporting the resilience of systems to future shocks and stressors. While the pandemic may be behind us, ongoing stressors like human-induced climate change and poverty remain, alongside current and future shocks like natural disasters, acute conflict and displacement and new health emergencies.

It is also being shown, however, that when governments were perceived to be responsive and adaptive to the needs of its citizens, social cohesion and trust in the state was maintained and even strengthened. Key to this were three qualities of the citizen-state relationship during the pandemic. Firstly, communication, which involved providing clear, consistent information, as well as listening to the concerns of the public and addressing them in a timely and transparent manner. Secondly, accountability, which was demonstrated by having clear plans and priorities, and measuring progress against these goals, and taking corrective action if initial plans were identified as no longer feasible. Thirdly, a commitment to collaboration, which meant working with a wide range of stakeholders to develop and implement responses and sharing resources and expertise (Oronce and Tsugawa, 2021; Carter and Cordero, 2022; Guo et al., 2022). What our findings have demonstrated is how a visible and vital state institution like education can serve to support and strengthen social capital in a time of crisis, or alternatively, undermine it. Communication, accountability, and collaboration are important to achieving this aim.

Our thematic analysis from the case studies highlights how across the five countries examined, well-supported, local education actors were best positioned to make decisions about what was most appropriate and relevant to their location, schools, and learners. During COVID-19, this was notably clear since there were pronounced regional differences across countries in terms of levels of exposure, such as in large cities or border towns with cross-border traffic. A system's ability to stagger responses as needed assured that school closures—particularly those in subsequent waves of COVID-19 where cases started to rise—did not necessarily have to apply uniformly, and learners in lesser-affected areas could continue in-person education. A similarity across Georgia and Colombia was national institutions empowering decentralized actors, but with significant ongoing support, and effective mechanisms of these actors feeding back up into centralized decisions and action. Notably, the MoE in Colombia appeared to have learned from past crises (such as natural disasters and internal conflict), where it did not offer support to *Secretarías,* and decided in the context of COVID-19 to provide technical support and advice over school reopening plans. Georgia identified and mobilized the capacity of its regional ERCs for localizing educational responses. It did so at the same time as increasing mechanisms and frequency of communication from sub-national to national actors that informed ongoing national level strategy and planning. Hence, decentralization reforms which fully empower localized bodies in decision-making, but maintain lines of accountability to central authorities, may be essential for linking social capital to be maintained in contexts of crisis and conflict (Edwards and Higa, 2018).

Given this conclusion, building back better involves ensuring that within longer-term educational sector recovery plans, efforts are made towards strengthening networks, alliances, and channels of communication between decision-makers and communities; and that conversely education be given priority as a sector within wider governance reforms which prioritize strengthening autonomous and accountable decision-making by actors closest to the classroom (educators, communities, caregivers). Building back better, we argue, cannot be done without investments in education—but likewise education sector recovery cannot be done without a focus on strengthening inclusive, transparent decision-making and citizen-led accountability measures which extend within and beyond the education sector.

In making this argument, the intention is to avoid mistakes made during prior crises, where education was often ignored as a critical sector in the recovery and reconstruction periods (see earlier discussion on Ebola response). Education remains a fundamental driver for national growth and human capital development. Failure to return to the trajectory the world was on pre-COVID-19 in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 4 could lead to a loss of nearly $10 trillion USD of income-earning potential in the future, and much higher incidences of populations living in abject poverty for several generations to come (Azevedo et al., 2021). Yet, as countries' debt burden increases because of COVID-19, public expenditure on education, health, and other social protection is likely to decrease. Zambia—which became the first African country to default in the COVID-19 era in November 2020—saw reduction in public expenditure on education (alongside other sectors) for 2021 during a time when the national COVID-19 Education Contingency Plan is still largely unfunded (Flemming and Mwaanga, 2021). Zambia offers a stark example of how resilience of the education sector is intrinsically tied to the resilience of the economy broadly. With decreasing public expenditure on education—and across all sectors—it is important to acknowledge that there are significant barriers to both recovery and building resilience that are most fundamentally due to a lack of financing. Yet without investments and reforms in social services, there is a high risk that like what occurred in West Africa following the Ebola crisis, grievances between citizens will grow, as will grievances between citizens and the state. If that happens, the greatest risk to building back better will come from a permanent rupture to the social contract (Shah et al., 2016). Now is the time to place education at the core of all post-COVID response measures considering the very visible and important role it plays in communities in the midst of a crisis. Simultaneously, education responses must not erode that public trust, by ensuring that all decisions made on behalf of learners are done in ways that are transparent, accountable, equitable and seen to address the needs and concerns of education stakeholders at the community and school level. Only then, is there an opportunity for education to be used as an opportunity for societies 'coming together' after the pandemic, rather than 'coming apart' as ruptures and tensions mount (Larsen et al., 2023).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by University of Auckland Human Ethics Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

RS was the main author of this article and contributed to the conceptualization and arguments developed in this manuscript and drafted most sections of it. JF was involved in the conceptualization of this manuscript and supported the acquisition and analysis of the data and revised it for intellectual content. JC supported the acquisition and analysis of the data and reviewed initial draft manuscripts. GH was involved in the conceptualization of the wider study in which data from this article was drawn and led the acquisition and analysis of all data included in this article. All authors read and approved the submitted version of the article.

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Conflict of interest

JF, JC, and GH was employed by the company GK Consulting.

The remaining authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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