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Health Pandemic and Education Access: Constraints and Possibilities of Non-Formal Community-Based Volunteerism in Education in Emergencies

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Health Pandemic and Education Access: Constraints and Possibilities of Non-Formal Community-Based Volunteerism in Education in Emergencies

Adaobiagu Nnemdi Obiagu *

Abstract: COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the existence of non-formal community-based volunteering (NCV) across countries. NCV during the COVID-19 lockdown was, however, mainly in health and welfare causes since previous studies showed it improved citizens' health care and awareness in health emergencies (e.g., Ebola) in Africa. Educational needs were underemphasized and mainly managed by formal organizations; and their services are usually not enough. NCV, being substantial in Africa, could be leveraged on to meet children's educational needs during emergencies. To effectively utilize NCV to maintain access to education in emergencies (EiE), we need to understand its constraints. Hence, this paper adopts an autoethnographic method to highlight the lessons learned, from an NCV in EiE initiative during the health pandemic lockdown in Nigeria, about the constraints and possibilities of NCV in EiE. The volunteers were two education graduates and the targeted beneficiaries were COVID19-induced out-of-school children (ages 6-14) from low-income backgrounds. Important lessons for health (post)pandemic education policies, practices and preparedness emerged from NCV in EiE encountered constraints, including curriculum, legal, security, and political challenges. Given the findings, the study proposes institutionalizing NCV in EiE and ways of the institutionalization to enable increased access to education of vulnerable children.

Keywords: Health crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, Non-formal volunteerism, Education access, Education in emergencies, Nigeria.

Introduction

Actors in education in emergencies (EiE) are mainly formal organizations and institutions (e.g., UNICEF, Save the Children, INEE, Education Cannot Wait, national government agencies and local NGOs) funding EiE and providing formal volunteer opportunities in EiE sector. These volunteer activities and funding, targeted at increasing access to education and the quality of instructions received by children, have mostly been in humanitarian settings (conflicts zones, refugee camps, and settings of natural disasters). Traditionally, health education - creating awareness about a disease and how to prevent its spread or seek medical help when infected - is emphasized during health crises as seen with

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health emergencies such as HIV/AIDS and Zika virus. However, experiences from some health crises, such as Ebola epidemic in Africa (Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia) and the current COVID-19 pandemic, where in-person schooling was closed and school dropout rate increased after health crisis for varying reasons including teenage pregnancies, suggest that health emergencies are more disruptive of education systems and require more than health education and EiE response strategies adopted in traditional conflict and disaster humanitarian settings.

Statistically, COVID-19 pandemic created the largest disruption of education systems in history, with nearly 1.6 billion (94%) learners affected globally and 99% affected in low-middle income countries (United Nations, 2020). During health emergencies, maintaining access to schooling, keeping education ongoing, reducing dropout rates, and ensuring that students return to school after reopening of schools remain crucial goals. Electronic learning, which includes digital or online learning and TV and radio school programs, were mainly adopted during health crises to keep education running. These electronic approaches are, however, largely exclusive since children from low socioeconomic backgrounds usually do not benefit from them due to their lack of access to electricity, internet data and required electronic devices (Powers & Azzi-Huck, 2016; Sial, Sarwar, & ul Hassan, 2020). And where effective, some formal actors such as the UNICEF play contributory roles –through encouraging, supporting and monitoring the participation and progress of children– in such programs (UNICEF, 2020). This calls for the need to explore other alternative approaches such as non-formal community-based volunteerism in EiE. In the African context, non-formal community-based volunteering (NCV) in EiE, subsequently defined, offers some hope and can serve as complementary practices in EiE. Adopting NCV in education will facilitate the realization of sustainable development goal 4 in Africa, since NCV is indigenous and traditional to Africa and still substantially exists in the region alongside western form of volunteering (Graham, Patel, Ulriksen, Moodley, & Mavungu, 2013). Promoting access to education through NCV requires basic understanding of NCV in EiE. Research in this area is limited: the experiences from community-based actions of formal organizations in EiE, though could offer some analogous insights into this, are insufficient for expansive action.

From the above perspectives, this paper aims to provoke interest and discussions on how to draw on NCV to increase access to education of children at risk of not accessing education in communal settings and institutionally weak African countries. To realize this aim, it draws on auto ethnographic journal entries on two separate activities in Nigeria to analyze and illuminate the challenges and possibilities of NCV in EiE, especially during health crises. The two different activities include (a) a non-formal community-based volunteering, an EiE initiative for children aged 6 to 14 years attempted by the author and a colleague during the COVID-19 school shutdown; and (b) a survey research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's education across socioeconomic groups in Nigeria co-investigated by the author. Lessons drawn from the findings are hoped to inform (post)pandemic EiE policies, practices and preparedness. The paper begins with a statement of the study's objectives and research questions, and a discussion of access to education in Nigeria and the roles of public-private actors, including the volunteer initiative upon which this study is situated, in increasing education access in Nigeria. I then

discuss EiE in health emergencies followed by a discussion of literature on volunteerism in EiE to highlight existing gaps needing further attention. I describe the design of my study and provide the auto ethnographic data that my study examined. The findings of the study are then presented. Based on the findings, the possibilities of NCV in EiE are presented, following which the paper concludes with an argument for the institutionalization of NCV in EiE in ways that retain its essence and recommendations of strategies for the institutionalization.

The main objective of this paper is to highlight the challenges of non-formal community-based volunteering (NCV) in education in health emergencies and the possibilities of increasing access to education through NCV. The study's significance is that it could inform EiE theoretical frameworks, policy, and practice through expanding our imaginations of the scope of EiE contexts and actors as well as the legal and structural challenges that need to be considered in planning EiE intervention schemes. Its recommendations are useful for increasing access to education in Nigeria, especially in areas with low resources.

Access to Education in Nigeria

Following its commitment to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and signing of the Jomtien Declaration on Education for All, Nigeria launched the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Program in 1999 and the accelerated non-formal education and nomadic education programs for adults and youths who dropped out of school or could not access formal education. As a departure from previous policies, the UBE program makes basic education (covering one-year pre-primary education and primary and junior secondary education – Grades 1 to 9) free, universal, and compulsory for children of school going age, that is, children aged 5 to 15. To ensure UBE's success, the UBE Act that legalized/institutionalized the program further stipulates, in sections 2(4) and 3, punishment against noncompliant parents/guardians and corrupt officials. The Government also encouraged private organization to partner and contribute to ensuring the program's success.

Despite the implementation of UBE program for over 2 decades, the proportion of out-of-school children is high in Nigeria, with a staggering number of 10.5 million and 19.7 million reported to be out-of-school in 2018 and 2022 respectively (UNESCO, 2022) and girls more affected, especially in the Northern part of the country. Corruption, poor funding, insufficient human capital, inadequate infrastructures, and bureaucratic bottlenecks present challenges to the success of the program (Amobi & Oraelosi, 2016; Bolaji, Campbell-Evans, & Gray, 2016). Varying emergency situations, including disasters, banditry, conflicts and terrorism, compound the problem of access to education in Nigeria through creating unfriendly atmosphere for schooling. For example, Boko Haram terrorists destroy schools and kidnap students in the Northern part of Nigeria.

Although the context of this study, Enugu State in the eastern region of Nigeria, is reportedly among the states with the lowest number of out-of-school children in the country, many children in the State are still out-of-school, especially in rural areas because of insecurity and poverty (IIEP-UNESCO, 2021). The community schools available to rural students in this context are usually dilapidated and unequipped, with private schools

rarely present. The State funds education poorly. Also, girl children from poor backgrounds in rural areas in the context face challenges with accessing education. The recent economic and security challenges, including an illegal lockdown imposed by the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) –a secessionist group, preventing movements on Mondays of every school week, has reduced school attendance level in the region, including the context of this study.

The problem of access to education would have been worse in Nigeria but for the collaboration and intervention of private actors, including community-based non-formal actors, low-cost private schools, and international donors. For example, in contexts of high poverty and population, low-cost private schools are contributing to increasing education access (Härmä & Adefisayo, 2013) while education access in contexts of conflict is ensured through community-led non-formal education (Tillani, 2022). In the context of this study where access to schools on every Mondays and some other week days is unassured, private schools have maintained the weekly standard by extending schooling to Saturdays.

The activities of both public and private formal actors intervening in education access in Nigeria were however disrupted by the emergency created by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting to the largest EiE situation in the country following school closure in March 2020. Specifically, 46 million children were estimated to be out-of-school in Nigeria as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO cited in Nigeria Education in Emergencies Working Group 2020). It was projected that many of the affected children were likely not going to return to school in post-COVID-19 (United Nations, 2020). This projection seems materialized with the current approximately 20 million out-of-school children in Nigeria (UNESCO, 2022). In the study's context, children from low-income backgrounds faced more challenges with accessing distance education provided to mitigate the effect of the health pandemic on education in Nigeria. COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of the education activities of the public and established private actors gave rise to other forms of EiE actors and initiatives, such as the NCV initiative, described under the methods section, which this study analyzed. It calls for the expansion of EiE initiatives and actors. The next section discusses literature on EiE to foreground arguments for NCV in EiE.

Education in Emergencies: The Scope, Purposes, and Challenges

Education in emergencies (EiE) is an aid, relief and empowerment learning response action and service – framed from legal and humanitarian perspectives - provided with the aims of ensuring the continuity of educational activities and realizing inclusive educational goals in settings of conflicts, natural disasters or other crises creating uncertainties and instabilities (Burde, Kapit, Wahl, Guven, & Skarpeteig, 2017; Paulson, 2019). EiE is characterized mainly by the context (time and place of crises or post-crisis), recipients (individuals facing crises), and administrators or actors (usually a conglomeration of various – international, national and private – actors) of a given education. EiE occurs in contexts of conflicts, disasters, health pandemic/epidemic, and social epidemic such as drug crises and poverty.

Mainly, the purposes of EiE are to maintain access to education, promote continuous

learning, and monitor the learning (including the contents and methods) as well as to promote the protection, moral and social-emotional well-being of children in conflict-affected zones through giving them a sense of normalcy during crises (Burde et al., 2017; Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). Attaining these lofty objectives of EiE is challenging for formal EiE actors. This is because of (a) the pressure on the limited available resources in such contexts, (b) the remoteness of some locations that may hamper access of formal EiE actors to such areas, (c) the uncertainties that surround the effectiveness and outcome of the education delivered in such contexts, and (d) the downplaying of the importance of education during emergencies by some individuals, including parents.

Realizing EiE goals appears more challenging in health crises. This is because while education in conflict- and disaster-induced emergencies contexts can be pursued through various means, such as transferring to a safer environment for schooling as was the case with Nigeria's Safe School Initiative where children in conflict-affected regions were transferred to schools in conflict-free regions (Tukur, 2014) or adopting e-learning, education in health emergencies appears only possible when implemented via online and other electronic platforms as there seems to be no safer non-electronic environment to relocate to. Yet the relevant questions, in development education and EiE discourses, of (1) how to maintain or increase access to education in times of crises and post-crises periods and (2) how to ensure that the education received in times and settings of crises is relevant to the recipients' future remains important to address irrespective of the nature of crisis faced. Relying on volunteers has been one of the means of maintaining access to education in EiE and hence, volunteerism in EiE is discussed next.

Volunteerism in Education in Emergencies

Volunteerism is a form of civic engagement; it involves voluntarily performing some tasks mainly with the motive of helping or fostering development without expectation of material rewards for self (Ajaps & Obiagu, 2021). Volunteering in causes promotes social cohesions and civic values; revitalizes the society and renew civic life; stimulates leaderships' responsiveness; leads to progress in realizing sustainability goals, especially in the area of health.

Defined by unique but context dependent features (unpaid, voluntary, altruistic), volunteerism takes two main forms –non-formal and formal or individualistic and collectivistic– and can be community-based. Unlike formal or organizational volunteerism –that is usually registered or incorporated with a specific purpose, structured, specialized, continuous and overseen by a formal body, non-formal volunteerism is non-structured and involves individuals contributing in different capacities to specific causes in their different communities, including professional, non-professional or local communities. Although the word 'community' is complex, in this work community volunteerism is taken to mean voluntarily serving, without pay, in a cause within one's own geographical location (Graham et al., 2013). In Africa, findings on volunteering in the region, as reported by CIVICUS (2011b) cited in Graham et al. (2013), show that African people substantially engage in non-formal community-based volunteering which is largely unrecognized while formal volunteering may be low in the region.

Education, including EiE, is one of the sectors where volunteers engage their services. Volunteering in EiE requires skills for protecting the well-being of learners and avoiding statements or questions that will remind learners of their traumatic experiences. Volunteer services in education include teaching, counseling, cleaning school environment, donating spaces for schooling, and contributing in rebuilding schools (Bali, 2019; Carlsen, Toubøl, & Brincker, 2021). For example, pre-service teachers were engaged by their universities to assist in school recovery in contexts of disaster through tutoring at affected schools. In Uganda, parents volunteered in cleaning the school compounds and improving play facilities. As gleaned from the literature, education volunteers usually volunteer through formal and community-based organizations. Prior to health crises, non-formal volunteering in (formal) education was usually limited to donating educational materials and facilities and serving as resource persons. However, COVID-19 pandemic disruption created a situation where non-formal community-based volunteers stepped in to keep education ongoing in low-income contexts that are outside the reach of mainstream EiE actors and initiatives.

Following the above, I argue that it is time we employ NCV in EiE practices to maximize access to education of children at risk of not accessing education, especially during (post)health emergencies. This is because the educational services provided by the governments and formal volunteer organizations in times and contexts of crises are inadequate as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. And adequate human resources, which non-formal volunteers can contribute to, is required to ensure education for all, including for visibly-displaced children -forced out of school by crises, and invisibly-displaced children - kept out of school by structural violence; they are not captured under the legal definition of displaced-persons but, though have a home, cannot afford basic needs including education. Encouraging non-formal community-based volunteering in EiE in Africa is important since (a) these formal organizations cannot feasibly cover all low-resource, rural and remote locations in Africa, (b) non-formal community-based volunteerism occupies a substantial position in Africa (Graham et al., 2013), and (c) village-based schools, where so closely located to the people, increase access to school and provide protection to children in emergency contexts (Burde & Linden, 2012). However, some challenges and opportunities exist for NCV in EiE: These are what this study reflected on and illuminated. The next section presents the method used in exploring NCV in EiE challenges and possibilities.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research. Auto ethnographic research method is specifically adopted in this study to investigate the challenges and possibilities of non-formal community-based volunteering (NCV) in education in health emergencies. The study's aim to provoke thoughts and interests in NCV in EiE makes auto ethnography the appropriate method for the study, since the data upon which this article is based, just like emergencies, were not preplanned but retrospective. "Auto ethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graph) personal

experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, Adams, & Bchner, 2011). It “use[s] personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Ellis et al., 2011). The data used for the article are auto ethnographic journaling based on two activities. The first activity was a NCV in EiE initiative (conceived in May 2020 and developed in July 2020 for children aged 6 to 14 years in a mixed socioeconomic town, Obukpa community in Nsukka LGA, Enugu State Nigeria) attempted by the author and her colleague, Calista Ezeodo during the COVID-19 school shutdown; Calista granted me consent to mention her name in this work. The two volunteers are education graduates and staff of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. They self-trained in EiE capacity and are licensed to teach by the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria. The second activity was a fieldwork on a survey research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s education in Nigeria co-investigated by the author between May and August 2020.

The NCV in EiE initiative, Free Lessons for Neighborhood Children, planned as a non-formal education, involved arranging learning venue, time and safety protocols, developing curriculum and lessons notes, and implementing the lessons. Parents were informed of the idea in June 2020 while the development of the curriculum and lesson notes began in the first week of July, with the hope to start implementation by the last week of July or first week of August when the curriculum was to be ready. Based on INEE suggestions, the volunteer curriculum drew from Nigeria’s national curriculum but focused on specific literacy, numeracy and citizenship skill. Multiage curriculum approach was also envisaged to reduce the cost of operation by capturing in one curriculum the needs, interests and abilities of children within a close age-range. This was mainly as the aims were to ensure that children beneficiary (a) do not acutely suffer loss of learning or lose interest in learning; (b) are mentally ready for schooling when school reopen -I sought to pursue this through emphasizing reading and basic arithmetic for Groups 1 (ages 6 - 8) and 2 (9 - 11), algebraic mathematics for Group 3 (12 – 16), and comprehension tasks, letter and essay writing, and parts of speech for all the groups, though the difficulty level will be varied; (c) acquire some active citizenship skills such as constructive criticism, empathy, recognizing and respecting human rights, discussing politics and challenging stereotypes, ethnocentrism and a culture of consumption over production. Further details about the initiative that evince constraints and possibilities of NCV are provided in Journal Entry 1. Although not an ethnographic research, my immersion into the initiative is similar to the observation process that defines an ethnographer.

The survey research, Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Children’s Education, investigated how children from different socioeconomic backgrounds in Nigeria accessed and engaged in learning during the COVID-19 school closure. The participants of the study were 201 parents of children in pre-higher education levels sampled across Nigerian states. The study found that children from high socioeconomic backgrounds had significantly higher access to learning resources and engaged more in learning than children from low socioeconomic backgrounds during the pandemic school closure. Many low socioeconomic families were unaware of the alternative e-learning programs and lacked access to reliable electricity, internet data and electronic devices necessary for participating in e-learning. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds were more engaged

in face-to-face learning secretly organized by private individuals, despite government's prohibition of this mode of learning.

The experiences from this research that connects to NCV in EiE are presented in Journal Entry 2. This paper draws on the thematic analysis of these personal experiences (volunteer and research fieldwork) to fill gaps in EiE research, especially in the area of EiE actors and intervention practices. Findings will raise alternative thinking about EiE actors and intervention programs already dominated by western practices. I use this approach to illuminate the challenges surrounding NCV in education during health emergencies; investigate the possibilities of increasing access to education in and outside emergencies through NCV in contexts of weak formal education institutions and limited formal community volunteering structures; discuss how to institutionalize and utilize the identified possibilities. Although criticized as prone to researcher's bias and data fabrications (Poerwandari, 2021), auto ethnographic method affords me the opportunity to articulate my experiences and that of the broader society, that could enrich EiE practices, into my research; and to circumvent conventional research restrictions such as prior plans for data collection and disconnecting researcher's views, emotions, and being from the field, data or project.

I draw on the mentioned two experiences to develop auto ethnographic journaling as my research data. The journaling was reflective; happened after the activities that motivated them. My journal entries involve these criteria:

1. It reflects on social norms and practices in context of uncertainties.
2. It is equivocal and incorporates emotions, vulnerabilities, and personal experiences into reasoning.
3. It visualizes settings and incorporates conversations to draw readers into the scene and evoke their thoughts about the information shared.

The Study Data: Auto ethnographic Journal Entries

Below are the two journal entries upon which this article is based.

Journal Entry 1: Account on NCV in EiE Planned Initiative

As I dropped my call with a friend -a call I made (following a radio broadcast in May 2020 that people violate COVID-19 rules) to ascertain the situation of things in his location (Federal Capital Territory, Abuja) especially concerning children's education- I pondered on what could be done to help the majority of children who could neither participate in the in-person schooling alternatives (i.e., e-learning) nor afford self-study or homeschooling. I have these children in my neighborhood, a mixed-income suburb; they are not only found in rural areas and slums (ghettos).

My encounter in May 2020, a time when the Nigerian populace were gripped by hunger and mixed feelings about COVID-19, struck my consciousness

and conscience. I observed that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds in my neighborhood played too much. I asked a parent (store-keeper) to some of the children what she was doing to help her children learn during the lock down. Her answer spoke to my agency in this hard time: "we have to decide on food and bills before books [education]. After the day and part-night hustle, I move to the kitchen at night, by the time I am done, I would be too weak to teach them. I can't force them to read. So, they will wait until school resumes."

To help children in my neighborhood, who do not engage in any form of learning during this period, continue with education, I devised a plan: to organize a free two-hours class per group (group 1: ages 6 - 8; group 2: ages 9 - 11; group 3: 12 - 14) three days of every week until school is reopened. I was able to mobilize a helping hand (Caly, a Master's in Education holder who is also a university staff) for the initiative; other willing volunteers live far from the community. We agreed that I develop the curriculum while she supports with the implementation. We located a venue that could accommodate 20 children when 1.5 meters spacing is observed. She volunteered a whiteboard and some of her children's textbooks while I volunteered sanitation materials; children were to come with chairs from their homes –desks can be foregone, we reasoned. I approached some parents living in low socioeconomic houses for an initial assessment of their thoughts about the initiative before developing lesson contents. They welcomed the idea and made some suggestions. I made effort to get the approval of the community leader.

Concerned about what multi-age and valuable contents/subjects to emphasize in this unprecedented time and to a class comprising children of different ages, I started sourcing for education in emergencies recommended contents. Concerned about breaching COVID-19 protocols with my actions and exposing us to either legal suits or police harassment, I also sourced for education in emergencies guidelines and health emergency laws in Nigeria. To my surprise, none of the accessed documents contained possible multi-age lesson contents or notes. Yet I needed a curriculum. Now, what subjects and contents should we emphasize? I began to develop one (on specific literacy, numeracy, and citizenship skills) based on my understanding of the pressing knowledge, values, and skills needs. I encountered gender stereotypes in the reading passages in the recommended English textbook I borrowed for the purpose. So, I began restructuring the stories to reflect a balance gender perspective.

This whole process delayed the initiative as I was overwhelmed with other tasks. As an educator, I want all children to engage in learning; as a lawyer, I am drowned in thoughts about the legal consequences of my action or my liability and the protections available to us as non-formal actors, if any participant of our initiative is diagnosed with COVID-19. At this point, political backing became important to me and I began making arrangement for that and soon we got news of planned resumption of schools in three-week time. Following the update, I suspended the initiative.

Journal Entry 2: Account on a COVID-19 Research Fieldwork

I was standing on the side of the road, in an inner street, that leads to the compound where a shop owner was doing her laundry on a Saturday afternoon, with her two friends keeping her company. After obtaining their consent to survey them, my coinvestigator surveyed the shop owner while I interviewed one of her friends. Some of our participants were reluctant to disclose the source(s) of their children's education during the COVID-19 lockdown because of their fear of prosecution from the government. I asked the interviewee: how do your children learn this period? "I enrolled them in a private [in-person] tutorial class (managed by a private school teacher who lost her pay due to COVID-19) and the teacher is doing a good job and collects ₦1000 a month per child", she answered. Her answer is similar to that of some participants living in surveyed low-income quarters. Her friend, failing to dissuade her from disclosing that fact, begged that we do not include the answer in our report, despite that we assured them of anonymity of their responses. I asked why, she responded, "Did the government send you?" We reassured them that we are independent researchers. Her worry was also observed with some other participants. Their worries seemed out of place. I understand. Police harassment and extortions during this period is alarming, following their authorization to speedily prosecute COVID-19 regulations violators (see NHRC, 2020). Everybody is on the guard not to fall victim. So, ethnographers are suspects to the public. It became evident from our study that low socioeconomic backgrounds heavily utilized the services of paid in-person learning centers secretly organized by non-formal actors during the COVID-19 school lockdown.

I felt bad about the risks the children are exposed to; parents' behavior that usually got associated with poor education. These parents are different, I contemplated. Their voices and complains still ring in my head as I type. "Our government neglected us." "They are playing politics with COVID-19 at the expense of our well-being." "They are scamming the international community with it." "They are wicked. Their children are still learning while they forced our children out of school." "The radio and TV classes are not the best. NEPA (electricity) is not steady. For online programs, where is the computer and money to buy data? Government said we should stay at home, so people are not making money." Some asked if we had plans for their children. One recalled, "a lady came promising to teach our children for free, but we didn't see her brake light again." Non-formal education centers are accessible and cheap option for them, I thought. Here are non-formal actors discreetly engaging in EiE. How do I help make their practices more effective? I meditated.

After the fieldwork, here at home sitting on my bed, I reflected on how people of low socioeconomic backgrounds value education, despite odds. How non-formal private actors were willing to keep education going either on a paid or unpaid basis and the fear limiting their engagement. I too, planning a

free education program for out-of-school children, is not divested of this fear that envelops both non-formal private actors in education and their patronizers at this time. The fear would have been different in a conflict-affected or disaster-affected context, I thought. In these settings, we most likely will see the enemies and avoid their attacks by relocating. Health pandemic is more affecting of education, I thought. Here, we do not see the enemies even when they are at our doorstep and the frenemies (government security agents) we see are mostly abusers of authority.

These two entries are chosen for this study because they speak to the challenges and possibilities of non-formal community-based volunteerism in EiE. Notably, research ethics were complied with during the conduct of the meetings and fieldwork upon which this journal entry were based.

Data Analysis

draw on the journal entries to answer the study's research questions. Thematic analysis was done on the journal entries to identify the challenges and possibilities of NCV in EiE. To ensure the reliability of the data, findings were discussed with my co-volunteer and researcher, parents, and independent non-formal education actors in the community where the study was conducted and they confirmed the findings. To minimize bias and assure quality of the data, the researcher remained self-conscious throughout the writing of the article and supported her interpretations with secondary data, previous studies, and news reports ([Poerwandari, 2021](#)). These findings are discussed next.

Finding and Discussion

This section analyzed the data presented in the auto ethnographic entries. The data addressed the thematic issues surrounding (the challenges and possibilities of NCV in EiE) the two research questions that guided the study. The challenges of NCV in EiE discussed are curriculum, legal, security, and political challenges while the possibilities of NCV in EiE discussed include (a) fostering access to education, (b) promoting the learners' readiness to return to school after crisis, (c) building resilience through togetherness and hope sharing, and (d) empowering learners for social justice agency.

The Challenges of Non-Formal Community-Based Volunteerism (NCV) in EiE

Beyond lack of funding and the dominance of western volunteerism that discourage engagement in NCV in EiE, the journal entries revealed the challenges of NCV in EiE as ranging from curriculum, security, legal to political challenges. Understanding these challenges could offer insights into finding "new ways to address learning crisis and bring a set of solutions previously considered difficult or impossible to implement" ([United Nations, 2020](#)).

The Curriculum and Lesson Notes Challenge

Evident from the first auto ethnographic journal entry is that private individuals are willing to volunteer and provide, via non-formal community-based means, education for children forced out of school by the pandemic. These non-formal community-based non-profit actors, however, faced a curriculum challenge; particularly a challenge about what subjects and contents to cover since the volunteers are busy employees lacking adequate time to develop lesson notes. In other words, there is a lack of already-made workable tools of action (curriculum and lesson notes) to keep learning ongoing during a health pandemic. The INEE standards for learning infrastructures, developing curriculum and education during emergencies reflect much of what exist in mainstream education or schooling in normal economies; it is difficult for non-formal volunteers in education to meet these standards ([Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2020, 2010](#)).

Although the question of what contents to teach children in emergencies or children escaping or facing long-term uncertainties has been a perennial concern for EiE actors ([Dryden-Peterson, 2017](#); [Burde et al., 2017](#)), health pandemics presented a different but more challenging scenario. The situation presented by the pandemic was one where the goal of EiE is not about equipping specific children (mainly refugees or internally displaced persons) for effective (re)integration into and effective survival in an already existing community that actively or passively excluded them from the mainstream education system; but about keeping the education system from collapsing and preventing vices associated with prolonged lack of access to schooling.

In many African countries, schooling was temporarily halted. After about two weeks, schooling was migrated to electronic platforms (mainly radio and TV platforms), and after one to nine months –depending on country (e.g., South Africa, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Nigeria)- face-to-face schooling was resumed ([Hoadley, 2020](#); [Edwards, 2021](#)). This resulted to a situation where the privileged continued schooling and many underprivileged were left out until in-person school resumption. The large-scale inequality in access to education during the pandemic also resulted to repeating of curriculum contents, already delivered via electronic media during the pandemic, after resumption. This repetition indicates a waste of resources and also questions the viability of maintaining the mainstream curriculum, via the alternative e-learning, during school closures. It raises the question of what contents to emphasize during pandemic school closures in a poverty or high inequality context and how to engage NC volunteers. Even where already designed and developed curriculum contents exist, developing lesson materials from them was a challenge to volunteers since some reading contents in recommended textbooks contained stereotypes, such as gender stereotypes, and hence discouraged their adoption for use. In sum, lack of a contextualizable curriculum and lesson materials is a challenge for NCV in EiE.

Legal Challenge: Ambivalence About the Legal Consequences of Volunteering in In-Person Education During Health Pandemic

There is a lack of legal support for in-person learning during health crises alongside a lack of a policy framework that supports NCV's role in EiE. It is deduced from both journal en-

tries that non-formal education actors were ambivalent about what the legal consequences of their engaging children in face-to-face learning intervention during health emergencies would be. This was despite the fact that the socioeconomic and cultural contexts of low-income communities and rural areas in a country such as Nigeria made it impossible for residents of such communities to comply with the COVID-19 Regulations.

As reported in various studies in Africa, disadvantaged contexts violated COVID-19 protocols due to insufficient facilities needed for compliance with the rules, crowded housing and neighborhood, religious beliefs, and ignorance (Johnston, Aluri, Kuhnert, Job, & Prober, 2020; Ossai, 2021). Although non-formal education actors followed the South African education in health pandemic model, that recognized these limitations and adopted a rotational school timetable to accommodate students in low-resource schools and children living in the same neighborhood (Hoadley, 2020), it is unclear whether the impediments to complying with COVID-19 rules in crowded contexts could serve as a logical defense for providing in-person learning for children in such Nigerian neighborhoods even with COVID-19 protocols observed by these actors.

This is especially as the Nigerian Government strictly shutdown in-person schooling and only approved a gathering of not more than 20 to 25 persons of which educational meeting (with children) was not captured in the approved gatherings. In a decided case, COVID-19 protocol violators who raised the defense of their social gathering (birthday party) being held in-estate (i.e., within street) and attended by only estate residents who did not leave the estate for another vicinity during the period of the lock down was overruled by the court of law (BBC, 2020). Hence, the worst-case scenario of a beneficiary of the intended NCV in EiE contracting COVID-19 virus was also imagined by NCV actors as shown in journal entry 1.

This ambivalence points to the need for a legal and policy framework guiding the provision of education in health pandemic in low resource contexts and the roles of NCVs; this will be buttressed subsequently. Even where the actors could risk being the source of a judicial precedent for scenarios as this, a greater challenge laid ahead. This challenge, discussed next, is the wanton violations of human rights by government security agents during the COVID-19 pandemic lock down.

Security Challenge: The Unethical Practices of Law Enforcement Agents

As captured in the journal entries, non-formal volunteers in education during the COVID-19 pandemic were further constrained from implementing their initiative by the growing violence, extortion and harassment of civilians by law enforcement agents who excessively abused their powers during the lock down. In Nigeria, physical violence, sexual assaults and extortions were used by many law enforcement agents, especially the police, against violators of COVID-19 regulations and non-violators or expert citizens such as the health officials duly on official duties (Aborisade, 2021). Many people were also extra judicially executed by the security agents to enforce COVID-19 regulations and under the instructions of some state governments, private properties were destroyed by law enforcement agents to enforce COVID-19 rules.

The context of violations, such as community support of the initiative and crowded

neighborhoods lacking facilities needed for compliance, were not considered by some law enforcement agents who used the lock down as a means to pursue their selfish-interest and perpetrate/perpetuate wickedness and injustice. It becomes unimaginable what the fate of politically-unconnected non-formal volunteers in education in health pandemic, in a context where the police abused the rights of health officials duly on duty during COVID-19 pandemic, would be. This was a discouraging factor that motivated the NC volunteers to consider seeking political support.

Political Change: Difficulty in Accessing Political Support

One of the key features of community-based action is the involvement of not just the community members but also the relevant community authorities. The risk involved with engaging in in-person classes during the pandemic and the high rate of human rights violations by law enforcement agents strongly necessitated the need to fulfill this requirement through liaising with the Local Government Area and the community's Igwe (traditional ruler). This is in order to have political backing and support. However, the lock down made reaching the offices of the political authorities difficult as workers were usually not around to attend to people. In the event of an unintended outcome, there was ambivalence of what the position of the leadership will be in the absence of their initial notification of the initiative.

The Possibilities of Non-Formal Community-Based Volunteerism in Education in (Health) Emergencies

The journal entries revealed the possibilities of NCV in EiE. The limitations of the adopted alternative e-learning models during the COVID-19 school closures in low-resource contexts and the readiness of non-formal volunteers to cover the created gaps are suggestive of the possibilities of NCV in increasing access to education during (post)crises. Radio programs appear more effective in the context of IDP camps where the progress of learners can easily be monitored and evaluated since the camp itself share similar characteristics with boarding schools. The very nature of rural and low-socioeconomic communities that lack facilities and infrastructures to continue with education or comply with COVID-19 regulations together with the proximity of NCV to local communities, further highlights the need for and possibilities of drawing on NCV to maintain and increase access to education during and after health pandemic. These possibilities are individually discussed below.

Fostering and Promoting Access to Education and The Readiness to Return to School

Many children dropout of school following prolonged school closures due to a lack of finance to return to school, loss of learning, poor academic achievement ([Kuhfeld et al., 2020](#)), and loss of interest in schooling, especially in cases where the student got pregnant, got married or got a means of subsistence. The auto ethnographic data showed that NCV could reduce these consequences through contributing to the maintenance of access

to education during school closure. The reduction of these consequences through NCV in education has been additionally proved effective by a community-based non-formal education model implemented in Nigeria (Tillani, 2022). This is attainable by engaging students in educational activities on a regular basis.

Building Resilience Through Togetherness and Hope Sharing

The EiE goal of building resilience in children facing uncertainties (Shah, Paulson, & Couch, 2020) can be promoted, in contexts outside the reach of formal organizations, by non-formal volunteers through keeping children educationally busy. This can give children a sense of normalcy during crisis (Burde et al., 2017), attenuate their fears of calamity in times of crises and reassure them that life is not over. NCV in EiE raises children's hope for a better future through creating opportunities for them to see people stand together to overcome. It contributes to forestalling social problems, such as teenage pregnancy, venturing into early-money-making by out-of-school children, child-labor and economic setbacks, that could prevent children from returning to school after crises.

The auto ethnographic data pointed to parents' loss of trust in government who they alleged neglected their needs, including the education of their children. It showed that the activities of NCV actors in EiE reminded low-income background families that they were not alone or forgotten. It built a sense of community and belonging among beneficiaries of learning support from non-formal actors in EiE. It reassured their trust in the community, thereby contributed to building togetherness and hope.

Empowering Learners for Social Justice Engineering

NCV in EiE is an attainable means to prepare students or learners, in crises contexts, for social justice engineering and agency. As gleaned from the auto ethnographic data, NCV actors are taking actions to bridge educational gaps and the beneficiaries of their actions support their initiatives; parents were willing to contribute services and children were willing to participate. This point to the fact that NCV could have the impact of empowering learners to engage in actions that could reduce inequality and promote everybody's well-being through engaging them in questioning stereotypes, politics of consumption/sycophancy and lack of empathy. For example, observing people engage in NCV in EiE and being direct beneficiaries of such initiative could motivate students to share their resources with others who have less. It could also awaken a sense of caring and social responsibility in not only the learners but their relations.

Recommendations for Institutionalizing Non-Formal Community-Based Volunteerism (NCV) in EiE

In this article, the prospects of NCV for EiE are discussed. To realize these prospects, the challenges of NCV in EiE need to be tackled through institutionalizing NCV in EiE. By institutionalization, I mean its recognition and promotion by governments, education agencies and the research community in ways that do not formalize them but retain their

essence and flexible nature as is the case with customary institutions recognized by the State. The approaches recommended for the institutionalization of NCV in EiE, though formal, aim to strengthen its utilization; they are not a move to formalize it. Presented below are recommendations on ways of institutionalizing NCV in EiE.

Enacting a Health Pandemic Law with a Conditional Protective Clause on Education and Formulating an Appropriate Policy Framework that Supports NCV in EiE

The many international, regional, national and local laws providing for and protecting the right to education also cover the protection of the right to education in emergencies, including the protection of school environments, learners and education workers. However, human rights laws in emergency settings were created mainly with conflict- and hazard- affected zones in mind. The outbreak of health pandemic and epidemics have shown how little existing laws protect the right to education. These laws are less practical on how the stipulated education rights would be enforced or implemented during health crises. Following the observed highly-abusive operations of security agents during the COVID-19 shutdown and subsequent suggestion that an EiE Department be created, it is important that a law be enacted to protect non-formal community-based educational workers from police supervisions. There is a need for a law protecting the right to education of individuals in the same neighborhood and/or with socioeconomic and communal characteristics that make difficult social distancing during health emergencies.

The law should provide for the authorization of non-formal community-based actions in EiE. An appropriate policy framework that supports NCV in EiE should also be formulated to complement legal reforms that will promote NCV in EiE. This is important to allay the anxiety associated with anticipatory police brutality against NCV in EiE actors or volunteers. So far, the many existing recognized non-formal education centers are those launched by NGOs in partnership with state actors and international donors, such as the USAID, to help out-of-school children prepare for reintegration into a mainstream education system. To mitigate abuse of the authorization, the law should clearly state the expected conduct, duties and scope of the practice of NVC in EiE Action Unit and volunteers, including prioritizing the roles to licensed teachers to mitigate the risk of deviating from the government's approved academic trajectory.

Developing an Adaptable Curriculum and Lesson Notes for Use During Crisis

In emergencies, the trend has been a focus on literacy, numeracy and life survival skills drawn from mainstream school curricular or a maintenance of all components of the mainstream curricular. During health pandemic, suspending the use of mainstream curricular and adopting EiE adaptable curriculum would be more efficient in poor contexts to prevent contents repetition. Relevant education stakeholders should collaborate and develop adaptable and contextualizable curriculum and lesson notes for use during health emergencies. This is necessary since school curricular are usually disrupted. As shown in this study, curricular disruptions leave volunteers confused and with much struggle to plan what contents to teach. A predefined curricular for use during a pandemic is

a way of strengthening NCV in EiE and will reduce the observed confusion and stress faced by NFC volunteers who may lack the time, resources, and motivation to develop a curriculum and adaptable lesson notes for this purpose. A predefined curricular will provide non-formal actor(s) who want to volunteer in EiE with a tool of action and not just a tool of planning action such as the existing INEE minimum standards and technical notes for EiE best suited for EiE formal organizations. The production of a learning and teaching material similar to “Self-Learning Program” planned by formal EiE actors for Syrian Children will be much useful.

The proposed curriculum should put into consideration the earlier highlighted broader aims of EiE and learners’ age. Depending on age, emphasis should be placed on literacy and writing, numeracy, citizenship, peace and human rights skills and critical thinking and vocational skills to (a) ensure that these basic skills that precede the understanding of other contents are not lost and (b) keep the students mentally ready and enthusiastic about returning to school. Contents emphasized for realizing these goals are elastic –serving for all contexts and time and, while the principles embedded in the contents are general, the facts represented in the contents can be modified by the implementers to suit specific contexts. There could be four curricular and lesson notes - curriculum for learners ages 5 - 7, curriculum for learners ages 8 – 10, and curriculum for learners ages 11 - 13, and curriculum for learners ages 14 – 15.

Establishment of a Non-Formal Community-Based EiE Action Unit in Education Departments

Practice has shown that non-formal education centers and vocational schools in village centers survive crises and are viable in increasing access to schooling while radio literacy and other education programs are usually not accessible by many children (Olumorin, Aderoju, & Onojah, 2018; Tillani, 2022). The educational disruptions created by COVID-19 and the challenges and possibilities of NCV in EiE suggest the urgent need for governments to be proactive in preparing for emergencies. One proactive measure would be to establish an NCV in EiE Action Unit under the Education Department of local government authorities and ministries of education through the suggested law and policy framework supporting NCV in EiE. The formulation of an appropriate policy framework in this regard and the recognition and establishment of NCV in EiE Action Unit in Education Departments is a step towards institutionalizing and strengthening NCV; it is not an action to formalize it. This institutionalization will help reduce volunteers’ fear of police harassment or reluctance to engage in NCV in EiE. It will also serve as a negotiation bridge between volunteers and community leaders. As noted by Obadare (2011), “volunteering is best performed and usually more effective when the state is seen to pay its dues (accountability) to the society.”

The establishing law should task the Unit with the following responsibilities:

1. Opening a register and taking logistics of individuals willing to volunteer in NCV in education during emergencies within the locality or community they reside. The volunteers could work on EiE curriculum and teach during emergencies.

2. Training the volunteers on EiE curriculum, social skills, and health/community risk assessment skills necessary to effectively work in emergencies.
3. Where radio and TV programs are accessible to a community, NCV volunteers could monitor homes/villages and encourage and guide parents and children to devote time to learning or participating in the programs during school closures.
4. Assessing the progress and performance of students' in the implemented alternative programs and their readiness to continue with mainstream education as well as monitor their performance in mainstream education after their participation in the NCV in EiE initiatives.

The above responsibilities do not formalize NCV in EiE since the actors are only answerable to the beneficiaries of their services and are not monitored by any authority in EiE Department. The essence of the proposed unit is to support educationally disadvantaged contexts by encouraging the activities of non-formal volunteers through sending them reminders and providing them with necessary materials and training. The Unit's monitoring role is limited to the learning that took place and its outcome and not the NCV actors. These could increase citizens' trust in the government as well as improve volunteers' skills. It could also mitigate the challenges of inadequate "trained" teachers and financial gaps in meeting inclusive education for all (United Nations, 2020). This recommendation is attainable since Nigeria government and some other African countries have successfully engaged youths in similar volunteer activities –community services rendered through national youth service and N-empowerment programs (Obadare, 2011).

Infusing EiE into General Education Courses of Education Faculties and Colleges

In fact, one of the post-COVID-19 pedagogic plans and action would be to infuse basic EiE goals, skills, and contents, especially peacebuilding and human rights, into general education courses (e.g., curriculum, psychology of education and special methods) offered in education programs. The educational and psycho-social needs of both forcibly or visibly-displaced and invisibly-displaced children should be incorporated into various education programs courses. Incorporating EiE into mainstream education programs could promote more research in these areas and prepare teachers as willing non-formal community-based actors in EiE, social change agents, and peacebuilders even in unimagined contexts and times of crises.

Conclusion

This paper reflected on the challenges and possibilities of non-formal community-based volunteerism in EiE. It found that the challenges facing NCV in EiE include lack of pre-planned curriculum, lack of explicit legal support and framework for face-to-face learning in health emergencies, increased delay in accessing political support for face-to-face learning in health emergencies, and security challenges, including extortions and harassment from security agents. The prospects of NCV in EiE include fostering and promoting

access to education and the readiness to return to school, building resilience through togetherness and hope sharing, and indirectly empowering Learners for Social Justice Engineering. The study concludes with a recommendation for institutionalizing NCV in EiE through some strategies including enacting a health pandemic law that considers the need to keep education ongoing for all socioeconomic groups.

Limitations and Directions for Future Researchers

The findings of this reflective paper are limited by some issues, which provide directions for future research. One was that the initiative was only a singular experience, with the final stage not executed, and hence, the data is not sufficiently robust to make a broader claim about the challenges of NCV in EiE. Also, the journaling was not systematized. Also, the responses from the survey research used to additionally reflect on the activities of non-formal actors in EiE did not flow from a direct question about the challenges or possibilities of NCV in EiE. Also, the participants of the survey were only the recipients of EiE and not EiE actors, especially NCV in EiE actors. Future research is needed into the works and challenges of non-formal community-based volunteers in EiE, not associated to any big or international donor, especially in contexts of invisible displacements, and how they can be supported to maintain and increase children's access to education in times of crises. For more robust claims, future studies should be based on series of NCV in EiE experiences. They should consider interviewing both NCV in EiE actors and recipients on the challenges and gains of their initiatives as well as observe the initiatives when possible. The limitations notwithstanding, some important insights on how to maintain education access through NCV during health pandemics were drawn from the study.

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