

COVID-19 and its impact on Adult Learning and Education: A scoping research in Afghanistan

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Introduction

COVID-19 has taken the world by surprise. During the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, both the State and non-state providers of all sectors have been affected worldwide. The education services were either closed or limited in all countries. There have been many research projects investigating the effect of COVID-19 on formal children education, but adult learning and education (ALE) has not been paid enough attention. The purpose of this research paper is to explore the impact of COVID-19 on ALE in Afghanistan and the strategies ALE providers used to overcome the barriers ahead of their provision. Desk review of the available documents and semi-structured interviews were used as data collection procedure in this qualitative research project. The participants were chosen on an availability base from the Ministry of Education (MoE), Education in Emergency Working Group (EiEWG), and Islamic Relief (IR) organisation. They varied from policymakers, administration and service providers, adult learning facilitators and adult learners.

This paper is part of a scoping research project funded by BAICE in the UK which is conducted in different countries – in the UK, the Philippines and Afghanistan. The Afghanistan case is undertaken by Afghanistan National Association for Adult Education (ANAF AE). ANAF AE is a national NGO founded in September 2005 as an umbrella organisation to foster the development of local adult education centres and adult literacy education programmes in Afghanistan. It provides literacy courses for adults in most of Afghanistan. ANAF AE is the main partner of DVV-International, and since 2007 it has become a member of the network of the Asian South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE), Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR) and other key partners.

ALE in Afghanistan

Literacy education is not a new programme in Afghanistan; King Amanullah Khan was the first ruler who officially supported and taught formal literacy courses back in 1925 ([DMoEL-Report, 2018](#)). Afghanistan had a specific deputy minister allocated only for literacy in the structure of the MoE. Recently, there has been major reform in the structure of MoE, resulting in changing the Deputy Ministry of Education for Literacy to a directorate. The reform has happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, which could add to challenges in providing education for both children and adults.

There have been no changes in the kind of programmes offered to adults. After finishing a nine-month literacy course, the adult learners receive a certificate from the State equivalent to grade 4 of a formal school. The learners from non-state literacy providers can also receive the certificate. Having their literacy course accredited, the learners can join the formal school system starting from grade 4. The post-literacy school programme is allocated for adults over 15 years old, including males and females. However, the curriculum is the same as the one taught for children in formal schools ([Robinson-Pant et al., forthcoming](#)).

Non-state Providers of Adult Education

Non-state actors have played a significant role in the provision of literacy programmes around the country. The Government records show that the majority of adult learners (63%) who completed the literacy courses in 2019 were supported by the non-state actors ([DMoEL-Plan Report, 2019](#)); for example, [Robinson-Pant et al. \(forthcoming\)](#) report that in Herat Province only there were 93 literacy courses offered by non-state actors and 10 courses by the Government in 2019. Additionally, with regards to access, MoE's annual report highlights that non-state actors' social connection with local communities and their geographic knowledge of the rural area placed them in a better position to provide literacy courses ([DMoEL-Report, 2019](#)).

[Robinson-Pant et al. \(forthcoming\)](#) categorised the non-state actors who are active in providing literacy education in Afghanistan into ten types – international, national and local

organisations, charity foundations, social associations, community councils, private institutions, voluntary groups, religious centres, and individual philanthropists. In fact, [Robinson-Pant and colleagues](#) believe these typologies have enhanced the provision and access to literacy learning throughout the country. Together with the Government, non-state actors offer many different types of adult education programmes.

In order to have organised cooperation, the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) group was created by the DMoEL and was coordinated by ANAFAE till 2020 ([LIFE, 2019](#)). After Afghanistan granted membership for Global Alliance for Literacy in 2020, the LIFE group changed its name to GAL in Afghanistan. The members are from INGOs, NGOs and DMoEL who have regular meetings and share their challenges, plans and achievements with each other.

Alternative Learning Pathways During Pandemic

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, all the educational facilities were closed by the Government of Afghanistan on March 14, 2020 ([Naidoo & Arian, 2020](#)); this included the universities, schools, madrasas, and literacy courses. Meanwhile, the MoE developed an alternative delivery plan ([Alternative Education Plan, 2020](#)). The plan consists of two sections: Emergency Response Plan and Recovery Response Plan.

Emergency Response Plan

The first section explains the emergency actions that need to be taken with the available resources. It focuses on the continuation of the education service provision. The first phase includes three alternative learning options:

- 1- Self-learning
- 2- Distance learning
- 3- Small group learning

Self-learning: the plan specifies TV and radio broadcasting programmes, literate parents, and mobile software applications as the learning mechanism sources for lower primary and upper

secondary school children in general and Islamic education, but nothing is mentioned regarding adult learners. Furthermore, the MoE has uploaded all the school lessons (from grade 1 to grade 12) as video clips on its website so that the students can access them from anywhere. However, there is nothing for literacy courses and lessons on MoE's website. School teachers and principals are also required to build their capacity using the MoE's guidelines and materials.

Distance learning: The primary means of delivery in this section is television programmes. These programmes are broadcasted by national TV and some private TV programmes. The plan also lists literate parents, mullahs of the mosques, and mobile applications as other resources that students could use in their learning process.

Small learning group: This is a face-to-face class that is suggested for communities and areas where televisions, mobile phones (smartphones) and electricity are scarcely available. Children may not receive enough support from their parents either. The number of students in these small group classes should be around 5~8. They should preferably be in an open area, and all the mandatory health precautions such as wearing face masks, washing hands, and keeping the social distance should be observed.

The plan states that "Literacy core course will also be delivered through distance education plan of the MoE" ([Alternative Education Plan, 2020](#), p.5). Since the plan only mentioned adult literacy education in the small learning group mechanism, there seems to be no plan in this document's self-learning and distance learning sections for this category of learners.

Furthermore, the MoE's plan suggests some capacity building training programmes and seminars for teachers, headmasters and school principals regarding distance learning. So, the goals of the MoE's alternative plan in the first phase are:

- Provision of education programs such as general education, Islamic education and literacy utilising the alternative education pathways for all students.
- Capacity building of teachers, head teachers, principals of schools and madrasas in the lockdowns period using self-learning training packages (p. 2).

In fact, taking a teacher training workshop is a mandatory prerequisite for every adult literacy facilitator prior to his/her teaching regardless of the provider – either the State or non-state. [Maleki et al. \(2019\)](#) report that adult literacy facilitators usually have a two-week training workshop before starting their actual teaching. The training is held by the MoE but sometimes the development partners assess the events financially and technically.

Recovery Phase of Response Plan

The second section of the plan focuses on the recovery process after the schools reopen. According to the plan, there are five steps that need to be considered:

- 1- Rehabilitating and maintaining schools with regards to disinfection based on the health protocols
- 2- Assessing the students' learning achievements and planning new strategies accordingly
- 3- Implementing the strategies to fulfil the incomplete sessions
- 4- Taking a final exam and promoting the students to upper grades
- 5- Increasing the demand for education through social mobilisation

The MoE requests all the State and non-state actors in the education field to contribute to implementing the alternative education plan. As a result, the Global Partnership of Education (GPE) contributed US\$ 11 million to support the plan, and it also allocated a \$70.000 grant to support the MoE's alternative education plan ([Naidoo & Arian, 2020](#)).

The Government has also developed a 157-page learning package explaining teachers' responsibilities and manners during emergency events such as COVID-19 pandemic ([Teachers' Learning Package, 2019](#)). The package goes into detail regarding teachers' communication strategies inside the school with students and colleagues and outside the class with communities. It advises the teachers on dos and don'ts during the lockdown and after the reopening of the schools.

Besides these plans, DMoEL has also developed implementation guidelines for literacy education for both learners and facilitators ([Rie et al, 2020](#)). The guideline is in line with the MoE's emergency plan; it outlines four means of learning: 1. distance learning through TV and

radio, 2. small group learning where classes meet with five students in an open area, 3. self and family literacy at home, and 4. self-capacity building of literacy facilitators.

Since COVID-19 pandemic was a new experience for the Government of Afghanistan, they had to develop new strategies, plans and guidelines. It might have taken some time to develop them, but once they were ready, the education providers had a clear pathway during the pandemic through these documents.

The Profile of Participants

There is enough information about the MoE in the above sections. More detailed information about EiEWG and IR are provided in the following section.

Education in Emergency Working Group

The Education in Emergencies Working has been active in Afghanistan since 2014 following the deactivation of the formal Education Cluster. The EiEWG still keeps its functions the same as a cluster despite the name change. The EiEWG is chaired by the MoE and co-led by UNICEF and Save the Children organisations. The primary purpose of this platform is “to provide safe and equitable access to relevant educational opportunities for crisis-affected Afghan girls and boys” (EiEWG Strategy, 2021, p.5). Obaid, an Information Officer during the pandemic, said in the interview that “it is an open group and we welcome all sectors that provide education, food supply and health services in Afghanistan.” He added that currently, there are members from private sectors, NGOs, INGOs, ministries, and civil society.

Islamic Relief Organisation

Islamic Relief (IR) is an international organisation that has been working in Afghanistan since 1999. They have been actively involved with projects in different sectors such as sustainable livelihoods, education, health, child protection, water, sanitation and hygiene, humanitarian and emergency response, and literacy in 35 districts of the country. IR’s adult literacy programmes were running during the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan. Their literacy

programme is for adult women (aged 15 to 45), mostly in rural areas. It is a prerequisite programme for the sustainable livelihood programme in which they receive training on how to prepare a business plan. After that, IR provides their requested material of a small business (100 - 150 GBP or 10.000- 15.000 Afs) at the end of the literacy course for each of the learners to help them start a microeconomic business to stand on their own feet and support their family members. After the literacy course, IR provides a vocational training programme to one of their family members. Moreover, IR establishes a 25-member Self-Help-Group (SHG) and trains the steering committee of the SHG on how to make a business plan and run the business. Finally, it supports the SHG with 250 GBP (25000 Afs) in their bank account for starting the business.

Table 1. Bio of the Participants

Participants (pseudonyms)	Gender	Position	Organisation
Salim	Male	Senior Policy Advisor	Ministry of Higher Education, Literacy Department
Obaid	Male	Secretariate	EIEWG
Mayar	Male	Country Manager	IR
Neekyar	Male	Provincial Manager	IR
Shahla	Female	Cluster Supervisor	IR
Karima	Female	Social Mobilizer	IR
Raihaneh	Female	adult literacy facilitator (ALF)	IR
Noori	Female	ALF	IR
Haidari	Female	ALF	IR
Alizadeh	Female	adult literacy learner (ALL)	IR
Jamileh	Female	ALL	IR
Najibeh	Female	ALL	IR

Analysis

Micro-Level Challenges and Solutions

The main challenge for all ALE providers was to have no alternative programme or plan when the face-to-face classes were not allowed at the beginning of the pandemic. All the education centres were closed for about two months. ALFs reported that the learners were frustrated because they were not allowed to join the classes. Shahla, one of the Cluster Supervisors of IR, said, “we and our teachers have received many phone calls from the students about the reopening of the classes; they could not wait.” Furthermore, Raihaneh, one of the facilitators, said that the learners used to come to her home and insist on resuming the class. Noori, another ALF, said:

“people in the village came to me many times and asked to resume the classes; they did not believe in the seriousness of the virus. But I kept saying that we need to be careful ... when the office is sure about your safety”.

The teachers tried to keep the learners motivated, and at the same time, they cared about the students’ and community’s health and safety. On the other hand, learners, who were all females from rural area, did not want to miss the chance to learn and be literate. Additional incentive and motivational factors such as being enrolled in the skill training courses after the literacy course might have been the reason for the ALLs’ desire to accomplish the literacy courses.

Meanwhile, the Government, with the help of the EiEWG, has been working on developing an alternative plan. They created a response plan and a guideline to have alternative education plans and strategies to reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic on education and learning at all levels. However, once the plan was ready and sent to all education providers to be implemented, both the State and non-state actors faced challenges while implementing it. Salim from the MoE estimated that “the plan had about 30% success rate [in implementation]”;

he added that “this means we could fill in 30% of the gap that was created as a result of the pandemic, especially in ALE programmes.” Obaid also believed that there were some challenges in implementing the plan; however, he insisted that “it was better than nothing; it’s our first experience and we learned a lot from it.” Both Salim and Obaid believed that the lack of having adequate infrastructure was one of the most important reasons. Salim said, “the Government of Afghanistan did not have the necessary infrastructure and equipment to support this plan fully.” He listed the lack of internet connection and electricity in many areas of the country as the main barrier hindering the implementation process of the alternative learning opportunities such as distance learning.

Further on this challenge which refers to the first phase of the response plan, the participants of this study indicated that there was no literacy programme broadcasted through the TV channel in the rural area of Herat Province. Jamileh said, “they [IR] told us that there is a TV programme for illiterate people, but we might have been blind to see that. Instead, I watched school lessons.” By saying “we might have been blind”, she is sarcastically saying that there has been no literacy programme on TV for them to watch in their village. Shahla also confirmed this and said, “there were teaching on TV but for school students not for literacy level; and there was a problem with signals in some places, and people could not watch the school programmes either.”

The next challenge was the limited time allocated for lessons in literacy courses. The class time was 2 hours every day (5 days a week) before the pandemic. Then, based on the Government’s policy, they met in small groups of 5 students. Neekyar said that because of an increase in the number of sessions, they had to have the class time for 30 minutes for each group. Najibeh said that she had 5 sessions for a group of 25 students every day. Some teachers found it challenging because they did not have enough time to cover all the materials they used to teach in a 2-hour session; and the group-work and peer-work activities were decreased because of the social distancing measures. However, Haidari found this an excellent opportunity for teachers to meet every individual's needs because of the low number of students, and she found this a great chance for the learners to boost their self-learning skills.

In order to compensate for the lost time, IR added 30 minutes to the actual class time. Shahla said, “when the classes resumed after the pandemic, our classes were back on normal size, but we had 2.5 hours for each session instead of 2 hours.” IR was thrilled with the outcome.

Neekyar said:

“in fact, the result of these strategies was very good that among 250 learners 113 received excellent scores in the final assessment. We gave praised them with a certificate and a scarf as a way to encourage them.”

Further investigation is needed to find out the actual cause(s) of the success of the learners, but it was not the focus of this paper.

Additionally, IR facilitators have used other strategies to keep the learners on track with their lessons and support them. One of the approaches was to connect with the learners through mobile phones. Najibeh, an ALL, said, “the teacher called me and asked about my lessons and the page number”. Her teacher, Haidari, explained, “I would call the students who did not have any literate person in their family and tried to monitor and help them through the phone.” She tried to encourage the learners and provided assistance when necessary. Since all the IR teacher are recruited from the local area, they visited the learners in their home if they could not connect with them.

Using the literate people in the families was another strategy which Neekyar, IR’s Provincial Manager, and Salim found it a very successful strategy during the lockdown. Salim calls it a form of ‘family literacy’ and said, “we [the Government] are thinking of preparing a policy on developing family literacy and individual learning mechanism.” Karima, an IR’s Social Mobilizer, explained that they would call the learners and assign a literate member of the family to help the non-literate person(s) in the family with their literacy lessons. Some ALLs also found this strategy interesting. For example, Alizadeh, an ALL, said, “at home, I was a mother, and my little child was my son, but in literacy lessons, my son was my teacher, and I was his student; it was cute.” Jamileh, another ALL, has continued this kind of communication with her daughter. She said that now she asks her daughter, who is in grade seven, to read her lesson, and Jamileh

monitors her progress. So, it has become a mutual informal learning opportunity for the family members.

Karima said that even after the pandemic, she encouraged the learners to keep working with a literate person in their family. IR's Cluster Supervisor, Shahla, saw this kind of informal family literacy as an innovative approach towards ALE and plans to keep this strategy in their future classes.

The next challenge was learners' stress and anxiety when joining the classes after the pandemic. Although neither the State nor the IR organisation had any specific programme to support adult learners with mental and psychological wellbeing, IR's health kit distribution had a great impact on reducing ALLs' stress during the pandemic. Both the facilitators and the learners expressed that they were highly stressed out in the first few months of the pandemic. They said it was a very new experience, and they had no idea what to do. Haidari noted that the number of the students decreased in the first months of reopening the classes; however, she added:

“the health kit [including face-masks, soups, gloves, detergent], which was distributed by the office [IR] to the teachers and students has helped the students to trust that we care about their health and they can come to class.”

In fact, one of the ALLs saw IR as her family, and their generosity motivated her to come back to the class with confidence; Najibeh said, “May God bless them [IR]; they gave us many things to stay safe. I felt like they are our family and joined the class with confidence.” Further, the facilitators indicated that they talked about the safety measures they believed have helped students feel more comfortable when joining the literacy courses.

Furthermore, IR has provided health literacy for the returnees; Mayar, the Country Manager of IR, said, “during the pandemic, the scope of our activities has expanded a bit, and we provided health advice for the people who returned from Iran.” Although these activities might not have been the focus of IR and other organisations, they prioritised these activities to help people overcome the challenges that COVID-19 created.

Macro-Level Challenges

EiEWG members faced challenges regarding the Government's regulations during the pandemic at a more macro level. Obaid from EiEWG said:

“The Government would stop us in most cases; for example, the organisations wanted to work with innovation, but the Government would not accept or support and would put its priorities first. For example, the small group and individual class sessions strategies were suggested by the State, so the NGOs / INGOs prepared their programmes accordingly but then the State banned all.”

He added that a significant amount of fund was returned to the donors and was not used in Afghanistan because of the shift in the Government's strategies. Although the Government imposed these restrictions to protect the people from the virus, some organisations have been negatively affected.

The other challenge EiEWG members faced in the provisioning process of education in Afghanistan was the transportation limitations during the lockdown. The movement of vehicles was restricted in most big cities in Afghanistan during the lockdown period. Obaid noted that this was a challenge for them when providing services for their beneficiaries around the country. He suggested:

“The Government should look at the situation differently during the emergency time. It should build trust among partners and serve with an attitude to focus more on mechanisms for solutions and do something that does not add to the problems.”

Besides all these challenges, community support was reported to be very encouraging for both teachers and learners. Noori stated, “we really owe to our community and Shura [community council]; they gave us a room for our class, and after the Government said we need to have social distance in the class, the Shura provided us with a much bigger room.” Haidari mentioned

that local people were asking if they need anything to have their classes going on. It shows people's interest and support for education.

Lessons Learned

COVID-19 has taught us lessons to be considered in future pandemics. At the Government level, they are concerned with the discontinuing of the education process. Thus, as a person involved in policymaking, Salim believed that the Government learned from COVID-19 that they lack alternative education programmes if an emergency happens. He added:

“it taught us to expand our alternative strategies and programmes for learning and service delivery or provision and have a variety of learning opportunities for the learners, especially for the adult literacy learners.”

Family literacy and individual learning mechanisms are on the Government's top list as means of alternative learning opportunities. The MoE is dedicated to developing policies and guidelines with the support of national and international partners on these programmes.

Cooperation and coordination among the State and non-state actors in the country during the crisis are the most important lessons Obaid said they learned to overcome the challenges. He insisted that during an emergency, “we have to focus on the solutions, not the challenge, and we have to cooperate and coordinate with each other to provide better service for the people at hard times.” He noted a crucial point here; look at the challenge but plan for a solution and coordinate with other active partners in the field.

Furthermore, the literacy course is only for nine months, and then the learners can join the post-literacy programme, which starts from grade 4 to 12. However, these schools are not available in most rural areas. Thus, most of the participants in this study suggested that the Government should provide them with the opportunity to pursue literacy education in their villages. Alizadeh said:

“our most concern after we finish this course is that we cannot continue more. We are women and it's very hard for us to travel to the city to join the Sawad Hayati

school [post-literacy school] ... sometimes it's because of insecurity and sometimes I feel my husband and family will not let me go far; and it's really far from my village. If there's one close to us, that will be a blessing."

In fact, insecurity, family and cultural norms, distance and being busy with family life were the main reasons most of the ALLs could not join the post-literacy adult school to continue their education. The challenges could be true regardless of COVID-19.

Whether at the micro- or macro-level, the challenges existed and hindered the learning process for adult literacy learners during the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan. However, the providers found strategies to overcome these barriers. Further, they learned new lessons from COVID-19 and proposed suggestions for the authorities at the decision-making level.

Conclusion

Afghanistan has a long history in the provision of adult education and literacy. However, decades of war and conflicts left the country with a significant number of non-literate people. Although the challenges such as insecurity and poverty still exist, many non-state actors (i.e. EiEWG members), with the cooperation and support of the Government, provided many opportunities and access for the people to join the literacy courses around the country. The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions have added to the challenges, but the education supporters and providers acted promptly and developed alternative pathways to maintain the learning process. The findings from this research paper revealed that not having adequate infrastructure for distance learning, the limited class time during the small-group classes and learners' psychological wellbeing were the main challenges ALE programmes faced while implementing the alternative plan. In order to overcome these barriers, the providers used strategies such as family literacy (i.e. asking a literate member of the family to help the non-literate person), using phones to connect with the learners, an increase in the allocated class time, and distributing health kit for learners and teachers. Among all these strategies, using a family member to help the ALLs was reported to be the most effective one.

Suggestions and policy implications

In a low-tech country such as Afghanistan, it is crucial to look for alternative learning opportunities and programmes requiring less dependency on technology. As the findings from this study suggest, the most effective approach in Afghanistan would be to use literate family members. However, only asking a family member to help the non-literate person in their family might not suffice. This paper suggests that policymakers should provide family members with guidelines and training manuals to follow, which would be more helpful for the family member. In addition, pedagogical training for the teachers and service providers needs to be considered regarding alternative learning opportunities.

The findings also suggest that many female adult literacy learners cannot follow their education beyond the nine-month literacy course. It has been because of the insecurity, cultural and family values and distance in most cases. Therefore, having more post-literacy adult schools in villages and districts would lead to more educated mothers. Finally, the findings from this study could be used to develop policies considering the challenges ALE providers and learners faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Acronyms

ALL: Adult Literacy learner

ALF: Adult Literacy Facilitator

MoEDL: Ministry of Education Deputy for Literacy

PLD: Provincial Literacy Department

ANAFAE: Afghanistan National Association for Adult Education

LIFE: Literacy Initiative for Empowerment

GAL: Global Alliance for Literacy

GPE: Global Partnership of Education

MoE: Ministry of Education

NGO: Non-Government Organisation

INGO: International Non-Government Organisation

OCHA: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

EiEWG: Education in Emergency Working Group

DM: Deputy Ministry