COVID-19 and Its Impact on South Asia's Education Systems: Learning from the Crisis

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1. INTRODUCTION

The South Asian region, which includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, is home to almost 25 per cent of the world's population. 1.8 billion of its population are below the age of 24, making it one of the youngest regions in the world. Despite the region's expanding economic relevance, its need for effective higher education systems still needs to be addressed. The Global North consistently ranks first for the majority of educational indicators according to the normative framework of measurement; South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, on the other hand, are always attempting to catch up.[1] And with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, global educations system went through unprecedented disruptions. According to UNESCO, school closures arising from the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on 87 per cent of the world's student population. Over 1.5 billion students in 195 countries were impacted by COVID-19-related school closures, according to UNESCO.[2]

As governments restrained their economies to slow the spread of infections, the economic shock was felt initially in many developing nations. As a result, South Asian developing countries experienced their sharpest economic collapse in many decades and the closures of their educational institutions.[3] This article will provide

1. Sarangapani, Padma, and Rekha Pappu. 2021. Education systems in South Asia: An introduction. Handbook of Education Systems in South Asia 1–26. (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3309-5_77-1).

2. UNESCO. 2021. Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in South Asia. Sub-regional report. (https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/16451/file/Situation%20Analysis%20Report%20-%20South%20Asia.pdf).

3. Haleem, Abid, and Mohd Javaid. 2020. Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic in Daily Life. Current Medicine Research and Practice 78-79. (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cmrp.2020.03.011).

insights into the state of South Asian educational systems following the COVID-19 pandemic. It will also critically examine the steps taken by governmental agencies, civil society organisations, and individuals to lessen the negative effects on the younger generation. Based on this analysis, some recommendations for dealing with future crises in the education sector will be established. The South Asian educational sector was not without challenges even before the pandemic; it was just that policymakers were not paying close attention to them. This article will solely examine the changes to the formal South Asian education systems following the COVID-19 epidemic due to the diversity of educational systems in the South Asian region.

2. SOUTH ASIA'S EDUCATIONAL SCENARIO BEFORE COVID-19

Only around half of primary-school-aged South Asian children received education that meets minimum learning levels, according to data from UNICEF from May 2018.[4] As per the report in 2018 by *World Development*, India was first on the list of nations in which a grade two student could not execute two-digit subtraction and second on the list of nations in which a grade two student could not read a single word of a short text. According to a World Bank Policy Research Working Paper from 2006, fewer than 20 per cent of Pakistani youngsters were able to understand a straightforward paragraph, with the majority of them being unable to read.[5]

Despite the fact that these statistics provide a preliminary snapshot of the level of education in these nations, a closer examination of the educational priorities of South Asian governments reveals that "learning outcomes" are given only a passing mention. The majority of governments place a higher priority on access, enrolment, and completion rates. Learning outcomes are not being sufficiently measured. Only one out of every twelve performance indicators set by the government in Bangladesh, for instance, is focused on learning. The evaluation of the Education For All initiative in Nepal found that there were no systems in place to keep track of classroom conditions and student learning growth. Learning is not prioritised in

4. UNICEF. 7 May 2018. South Asia leaders meet in Nepal to radically improve education in the region. (https://www.unicef.org/rosa/press-releases/south-asia-leaders-meet-nepal-radically-improve-education-region).

5. Patel, Dipa. 12 September 2018. Combating the learning crisis in South Asia. LSE. (https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationaldevelopment/2018/09/12/combating-the-learning-crisis-in-south-asia/)..

plans and strategies to improve education in South Asia. The rising budget share of education in nations such as Pakistan and Nepal, along with a continuing lack of learning quality, attests to the neglect of the "learning" part of education. Despite recurrent warnings from the Annual Status of Education Reports about low learning levels, India has made little progress in changing the status quo.

A World Bank report[6] noted that numerous governments in South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) had made significant investments in education to meet the Millennium Development Goal of providing universal primary education for all children by 2015. From 2000 to 2010, this investment caused the net enrolment rate in South Asia's primary schools to rise from 75 per cent to 89 per cent. But access to education varies significantly between South Asian nations as well as between various socio-economic and demographic categories within each nation. With nearly all children receiving primary education, Sri Lanka stands out as a glaring anomaly. Pakistan and Afghanistan continue to lag well behind other South Asian nations. As a result, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan, among other nations in the region, reported poor levels of education, despite a relative growth in literacy rates.

3. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION IN SOUTH ASIA

The aforementioned section highlighted that there were issues with the education systems in the region even before COVID-19. For instance, even when there are fewer children who are not in school and there are more girls enrolled, there are still many children, particularly young children, children with disabilities, and members of poor groups, who are not receiving a proper education. This was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying governmental measures since frequent absences from school significantly increased the dropout rates at all levels of schooling. Following the closure of schools due to COVID-19, every nation in the region quickly formed plans and took action to help children continue their education and to enable education to reach a large number of learners.

6. Dudar, Halil, and Anil Deolalikar. 2014. Student Learning in South Asia: Challenges, Opportunities, and Policy Priorities. (10.1596/978-1-4648-0160-0).

Although there were prompt reactions by the respective governments, many children in the region nevertheless experienced significant learning loss.[7] The most vulnerable populations were determined to be girls and young children from underserved communities with little access to technology. There is also a huge gender digital divide, with females being far less likely to own or have access to digital devices, as well as having far fewer opportunities to gain computer literacy skills. This has limited their ability to obtain a high-quality education.

According to UNICEF, over half of pupils between the ages of 6 and 13 reported "not using any sort of remote learning during school closures" in India, where schools are still closed in some areas and only recently partially reopened in others.[8] One-fourth of the younger children in Pakistan were unable to use any equipment that supported remote learning. Only three out of ten Nepalese children, according to earlier UNICEF evaluations, have access to any type of equipment for remote learning. But it was found that access did not translate to usage, either because one device was shared by several members of the family, because textbooks suited for home study and other necessary materials were not provided, or because some communities were unaware of the options that were accessible.

4. COPING STRATEGIES BY GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Changing the way education systems work is a global priority, especially in South Asia, given the region's pre-COVID-19 literacy levels and the projected learning loss for many children as a result of the pandemic. Governments throughout the region used varied strategies to deal with the educational needs that arose as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Afghanistan

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan, the government's inability to offer appropriate and equitable access to learning opportunities was a significant obstacle to providing quality education. Many children lived in families with illiterate parents, and even more resided in homes without access to television, radio, or the

7. UNESCO. 2021. Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in South Asia. Sub-regional report. (https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/16451/file/Situation%20Analysis%20Report%20-%20South%20Asia.pdf).

8. Ibid.

internet. Due to insufficient funds, the government was unable to print and deliver educational materials to all students. In addition, the government was unable to supply home learning packages to ungoverned regions of the country. The UNICEF office in Afghanistan received a Graduate Psychology Education (GPE) grant of $70,000 at the end of March 2020 to assist the Afghan Ministry of Education in developing a comprehensive COVID-19 response strategy to address the immediate, medium-term, and long-term effects of the pandemic on the education system.[9]

The Alternative Education Plan offered three learning options in an attempt to meet the home situations of students. The three channels were: a"Self-learning" via radio, literate parents, and mobile applications aimed at lower and upper secondary, as well as building up the capacity of teachers and principals; a"Distance learning" via television, literate parents, mullahs of mosques, upper secondary pupils, and mobile applications, interactive voice response (IVR)/phones, mobile applications, and the internet, aimed at primary Grades 1 to 3 students, and lower and upper secondary students; and "small learning groups" for youngsters in areas without internet, television, or radio and where parents could not support learning.[10]

In general, children's access to and involvement in learning during the school closures caused by COVID-19 were heavily influenced by where they lived and whether their families had access to resources, factors which were likely correlated with their socioeconomic level.

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the education ministries responded to the pandemic by launching an online teaching platform called the "teacher" portal, which had over 400,000 registered users, the majority of whom were school instructors[11] (ShikkhokBatayan 2020). This website provided digital content for the complete school curriculum

9. UNESCO. 2021. Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in South Asia. Afghanistan Case Study. (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/in/documentViewer.xhtml?v=2.1.196&id=p::usmarcdef_0000379505&file=/in/rest/annotationSVC/DownloadWatermarkedAttachment/attach_import_36463a20-d604-4f60-a9f5-a124d0e99db5%3F_%3D379505eng.pdf&updateUrl=updateUrl1979&ark=/ark:/48223/pf0000379505/PDF/379505eng.pdf.multi&fullScreen=true&locale=en#UNICEF_Afganistan_F5.indd%3A.20986%3A1580).

10. Ibid.

11. Ahmed, Neelofar, and Prerana Bhatnagar. 2020. COVID-19 and Unconventional Leadership Strategies to Support Student Learning in South Asia: Commentaries From Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Journal of the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration & Management.

(K-12).[12] Furthermore, the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) had a dedicated Parliament Television channel to broadcast classes offered by renowned instructors and experts in order to increase the reach of online instruction. This television channel does not require a cable TV connection and has a capacity for nationwide terrestrial transmission. Only parliamentary proceedings were previously televised using it. All of the classes that are broadcast on this TV channel were jointly created by the ministries of education and Bangladesh Open University.

Over the past few decades, Bangladesh has made great strides to raise school enrolment, reaching 98 per cent net enrolment in elementary schools[13]. Despite progress in expanding access to education, Bangladesh still faces difficulties in raising educational standards. The most important indicator of a school system's quality is whether or not its kids are mastering the fundamental subjects of math and reading. The reading trajectory of a student begins in the early primary grades, and according to available statistics in Bangladesh, the majority of early primary students have not mastered reading fluency and comprehension. The government's 2015 National Student Assessment found that less than one-quarter of fifth-graders could read at the required level and with Bangla knowledge.[14] A comparable situation involving arithmetic skills is indicative of low accomplishment.

Given these innate difficulties, it is impossible to predict how well children will be able to study and display their learning competencies. Furthermore, many children do not have access to television or YouTube videos, which are only accessible via internet-enabled cellphones. People with poor income status in Bangladesh are excluded from the online education facilities, even if there are no official figures available.

Bhutan

In accordance with the government's strategy for COVID-19 containment, all schools were closed as soon as the virus reached Bhutan. The national government has made considerable strides in ensuring that mobile and internet networks are accessible in all corners of the nation. The country's internet and broadband penetration was 75 per cent in 2017 (although subscribers only numbered 28,955 – less than 4

12. Ibid.

13. Directorate of Primary Education. 2020. Bangladesh Primary Education Annual Sector Performance Report 2019.

14. Directorate of Primary Education. 2016. The National Student Assessment 2015: Grades 3 and 5. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

per cent of the population). 92 per cent of people have access to a mobile device, and 532,089 people (about 69 per cent of the population) are 3G, Gg, and GPRS/EDGE customers. A fibre network covered 20 Dzongkhag in 2019.[15]

Despite this typically extensive coverage, only 60 per cent of homes have internet access. Forty-five per cent of rural families do not have access to television. The digital gap had a significant impact on kids who did not have access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT) or television because of an education strategy that highly emphasised using technology. Despite the growing rate of smartphone ownership, learning is best done on large-screen devices with strong functionality. In addition, there is no assurance that students will have frequent access to their phones. Many families could not afford modern technology, such as smartphones and computers, so as to be able to benefit from connectivity. Children in remote locations not only lacked access to technology, but also lacked parental support to use the self-educational tools effectively. Some students maintained touch with their teachers, but the decreased contact hours prevented them from receiving enough educational support.

The Bhutan Ministry of Health updates its daily-updated website with information about the pandemic so that the general public may keep track of the virus's status and the intensity of the response. These health messages are reinforced on the Bhutan Ministry of Education's website; the National Situation Update prepared by the Ministry of Health is presented on the Ministry of Education homepage along with a voice-over outlining how the virus can be spread by children on their way to and in school as well as the steps each child should take to minimise the spread.

Pakistan

Public, private, non-governmental organisation (NGO), and Madaris[16] schools all provide elementary and secondary education in Pakistan. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of lockdowns, the provincial ministries of education made the decision to close schools, taking into account the difficulties of social isolation and a lack of adequate hygienic support in the majority of

15. UNESCO. 2021. Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in South Asia. Bhutan Case Study. (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/in/documentViewer.xhtml?v=2.1.196&id=p::usmarcdef_0000379507&file=/in/rest/annotationSVC/DownloadWatermarkedAttachment/attach_import_6140d3b6-bf61-4ace-a052-ddda0cf0e5d4%3F_%3D379507eng.pdf&locale=en&multi=true&ark=/ark:/48223/pf0000379507/PDF/379507eng.pdf#UNICEF_Bhutan_F5.indd%3A.18297%3A1490).

16. Faith-based public and private schools operating with the aid of donations and the local community under the society act.

private and public schools. In order to provide online learning to children in grades 1 through 12, the Federal Ministry of Education launched a television channel called "TeleSchool" through the public broadcasting system on 1 April 2020[17]. While the situation continued to evolve, public schools remained closed until 15 September 2020; however, private schools finished the academic year using online and offline virtual education modules.

Despite the fact that public schools were still closed, the administration of each district's or province's ministry of education presented challenges to the school directors in terms of policy direction and technological assistance. For remote rural locations where instructors and pupils could not purchase technological devices due to their poor socioeconomic condition, this scenario was disturbing. The creation of TeleSchool offered a solution to the problems that were present. However, there were questions regarding whether it would further isolate disadvantaged groups through the inadvertent creation of a digital divide due to its limited visibility in remote places, the calibre of the courses, and the nature of non-reciprocal learning.

India

While India has achieved significant success in increasing gross primary school enrolment to 122,960,000 as of 2017[18], the National Sample Survey Office and other annual studies have found that 32 million Indian youngsters have never attended school.[19] Over 50 per cent of fifth-grade kids cannot read an introductory text or answer elementary arithmetic problems. With the burden of structural inequalities such as poverty, child labour, low-income status, scarcity of resources, educational inequality, and a widening rural-urban divide, the Indian government provided remote learning, subsidised internet connections, and cancelled end-of-year exams in some states.

The unexpected shutdown placed both private and government-run schools in an emergency remote teaching situation as pre-primary/nursery school admissions,

17. Ahmed, Neelofar, and Prerana Bhatnagar. 2020. COVID-19 and Unconventional Leadership Strategies to Support Student Learning in South Asia: Commentaries From Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Journal of the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration & Management.

18. UNESCO. 2020. Data for Sustainable Development Goals: India. (http://uis. unesco.org/en/country/in).

19. Annual Status of Education Report. 2018. ASER centre. (https://img.asercentre.org/docs/ASER%202018/Release%20Material/aserreport2018.pdf).

entrance examinations of various colleges, and competitive examinations were all held at the same time that the pandemic was spreading throughout India.[20] While the digital shift in teaching and learning has primarily benefited private schools, it has failed to permeate the grassroots level, causing low-income pupils to be excluded from the education system. As quarantine procedures became operational, state education ministries attempted to handle the crisis by developing efficient digital learning systems to assist students, teachers, and parents in maintaining educational continuity and navigating the hurdles presented by the epidemic.[21] In response to the dilemma, the Indian government and the Ministry of Human Resource Development embraced a multimodal strategy of innovative e-learning, online education, and distance-education solutions.

Similarly, numerous virtual learning aids were produced for higher education students, including a television-based education programme to reach a larger audience – the Swayam Prabha, a collection of 32 direct-to-home channels available to students across the nation.[22] Nonetheless, few private schools were able to successfully utilise online technologies, and school administrators struggled to integrate them in other school sectors. In these difficult times, the online shift in education created a digital divide that has disenfranchised underserved pupils even further.

Maldives

Initial attempts at providing continuity in education were impeded by the sudden closure of key TV production facilities and government offices when Malé went into lockdown due to the arrival of COVID-19 cases, despite the fact that remote learning had been planned and operationalised. Mobile networks and internet services reach every island in the Maldives, yet there were issues with technological infrastructure and internet access. A March 2020 survey conducted by the Ministry

20. Wadia, Leena. 2020. Online school education in India during and beyond the pandemic. Observer Research Foundation. (https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/online-school-education-india-during-beyond-pandemic-69317/).

21. Erpula, Suresh. 6 July 2020. Covid crisis has showcased the resilience and innovation of the education system. The Indian Express. (https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/indian-education-system-ekalavya-model-residential-schools-coronavirus-virtual-classes-6491697/).

22. World Bank. 2020. The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses. (https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/the-covid19-pandemic-shocks-to-education-and-policy-responses).

of Education revealed that 31 per cent of the prospective audience[23] for school education distance-learning programmes lacked internet or WiFi connection at home. In the absence of a home internet connection, data was particularly expensive when purchased as mobile data.

As a way forward, in May 2020, the Maldives created an Education Response Plan (ERP) for COVID-19. This document served as the foundation for formulating a comprehensive and budgeted response strategy, and it included a thorough analysis of the Maldives' historical context as well as the difficulties, financial ramifications, and effects of COVID-19 on the school education sector. The ERP took into account the probable effects of COVID-19 on the school education sector in its background and analytic parts.[24]

The COVID-19 ERP deemed the ICT master plan indispensable for the further growth of ICT use. A budget of $48,000 was granted to assist the initiative, and a unit would be created to enable its execution. Through Maldives Education Management Information System (MEMIS), data collection and distribution were improved. This involved optimising processes in schools and Ministry of Education units, guaranteeing data accuracy and verification, and disaggregating data in order to identify gender, special education needs (SEN), and disability status. The plan also entailed the establishment of a cost-effective and sustainable solution for the provision of virtual learning to enable the continuance of education throughout future emergencies and disasters.

Nepal

Similar to other low-income nations, Nepal has significant socioeconomic and educational/literacy inequalities among its population. With the advent of COVID-19, the digital divide and unequal access to e-learning and e-resources will exacerbate the inequities between privileged and underprivileged children, which have been largely attributed to the current education system and its uneven distribution of resources. Due to the closure of schools, the government had to determine how to ensure that students continued to receive their education. Accessibility and ability to provide regular (virtual) updates were two benefits of online education. To reach

23. Students, teachers and parents.

24. UNESCO. 2021. Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in South Asia. Maldives Case Study. (https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/16526/file/Maldives%20Case%20Study%20.pdf).

as many children as possible despite limited internet access, the administration was conscious of the necessity for alternative methods.

Based on the children's access to energy and connectivity, they devised a multi-pronged strategy with varied modalities for different age groups. Multiple local governments launched radio and television learning programmes and offered self-learning kits to persons without internet access. Using their knowledge of local obstacles, a number of municipalities have altered their strategies to meet specific needs. In response to the realisation that not enough radios were available to households, for instance, they provided self-learning packets to students[25]. However, there are still unique obstacles to reaching the most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, and the local governments need greater assistance to execute inclusive activities for quality education.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic has been prompt, decisive, and organised, employing a whole-of-society strategy. This participative strategy entailed multisectoral ministerial coordination at all levels of government, with specific responsibilities to combat the epidemic. Strong direction was provided by the government, with assistance from the Ministry of Health, Indigenous Medical Services and the World Health Organisation. Sri Lanka's government took prompt steps to safeguard the safety of its population.

During the period of school closures in Sri Lanka, its Ministry of Education and provincial education departments (PDE) at the national and subnational levels have endeavoured to provide pupils with continuous education. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with internet service providers, has activated its web-based learning platform E-thaksalawa and devoted two public television channels to instructional programming. Some private television stations also allotted one to three hours every day to run government-created instructional programming.[26]

In order to increase utilisation of E-thaksalawa and assure wider access, the government of Sri Lanka took steps to provide free access to the website via any

25. UNESCO. 2021. Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in South Asia. Nepal Case Study. (https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/16616/file/Nepal%20Case%20Study%20.pdf).

26. UNESCO. 2021. Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in South Asia. Sri Lanka Case Study. (https://www.unicef.org/srilanka/media/2296/file/Situation%20Analysis%20on%20the%20effects%20of%20and%20Responses%20to%20COVID-19%20on%20the%20Education%20Sector%20in%20Asia.pdf).

telephone network. Given the fluid nature of preparation, the majority of teachers utilised mobile applications such as WhatsApp and Viber to maintain regular communication with their students, fellow teachers, and school administration. The education administration structure was not as adaptable as the teaching-learning side of the industry. The monitoring and school support operations failed to capture the impact of what was occurring in the education sector because they could not keep up with the rate of change.

5. MOVING TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4: A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO CHANGE

The case studies of South Asian countries shown in the preceding section demonstrate that local expertise and experience are crucial for reaching all children in the most effective manner, and that the finest solutions to providing continuity of education during the COVID-19 pandemic have occurred at the local level. This, along with the recognition that learning occurs outside of school, is fundamental to building a new system and has implications for ensuring that each country not only develops the appropriate framework policies (e.g., blended learning), but also delegates authority to districts and sub-districts to tailor their learning plans to the youngest and most marginalised children in their area.

By leveraging the benefits of technology through a hybrid approach, education may become more accessible and egalitarian, learner-centred, flexible, and of higher quality for students of all ages and geographic locations. This will feature a combination of face-to-face and distant-learning modalities that are suited to each learner's context and can be accessed online or through low-tech means. The implications of COVID-19 on how people live, study, and work have demonstrated that learning may take place at any time and in any location, and that physical schools are not the only places where learning occurs. This will aid the advancement towards Sustainable Development Goal 4, which seeks to "provide inclusive and equitable quality education and encourage opportunities for lifelong learning for everyone."

As technology makes it possible to provide all children with access to high-quality information through effective, interesting, and appealing online learning solutions, these may be utilised to align formal and non-formal education results and to cultivate technical and vocational competencies. When it comes to secondary school completion, post-secondary and higher education, and technical and vocation training, all of these can benefit greatly from online learning because of the convenience of online validation of learning or competences. Despite the fact

that COVID-19 has accelerated the transition timeline for many countries and made the need for change more apparent, it has also demonstrated the potential for change and proved that it is possible.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed system weaknesses, highlighted system strengths, and ironically provided a key moment in history to effect change. As digitalisation has increased throughout the region, one must not forget that children living under poverty were further marginalised by the pandemic. Digitalising education brings the region closer to SDG 4 by making education more inexpensive, accessible, and inclusive, but there are currently no concrete plans or programmes that incorporate children from marginalised populations. Here are some recommendations to increase regional education quality and sustainability.

1. The needs of disadvantaged and underprivileged children, such as those with disabilities, minority mother-tongues, and other minorities, are more complex than simple "national" remedies can meet. All children require more local contextualisation and capacity mobilisation to have adequate educational options. Teachers will need training on gender-responsive and inclusive methods to best serve all students. Teachers need improved training to recognise disabled youngsters. Formative assessment in the classroom allows for proper support of all students.

2. As indicated previously, many hard-to-reach children were further marginalised during the pandemic and will require additional, focused help to avoid falling farther behind their peers. To make targeted, costed investments and prioritise initiatives, continual, thorough monitoring is required to acquire real-time data. Specific community surveys and learning assessments will be required to inform planning. Attendance tracking will be essential and should feed into EMIS Early Warning Systems so that students who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out can be identified and given the required support to prevent this from occurring. As nations consider adopting a blended learning strategy, monitoring should include information on school infrastructure, particularly the quality of electricity supply and internet connection and the availability of various types of technology.

3. Access to mental health and psychosocial care that is timely and effective is also essential for the development of resilient and healthy communities. Therefore, pandemic response plans should address the pathways for the

delivery of vital health and social services to pre-school, elementary, and secondary school children and adolescents, and ensure that these services are safeguarded. This involves the fulfilment of bodily, mental, and psychosocial requirements.

4. In response to COVID-19, there have been instances of international collaboration between government and non-government entities. The same level of collaboration is required to comprehensively assess, cost, and develop pandemic preparedness efforts that address the health, welfare, and nutrition needs of pre-school and school-aged children, in addition to their learning needs, in order to rebuild and safeguard their development.

5. Many children living under poverty or in marginalised communities were further marginalised by the pandemic and thus will require additional, focused support so that they do not fall further behind their classmates. Governments in the region must ensure that the poorest and most marginalised children are not disproportionately affected by the pandemic over the long term. In the near term, they must emphasise the provision of social protection measures to the most disadvantaged households. This will necessitate cross-sector cooperation between the health, education, and social welfare ministries. Priority should be given to children, particularly females and those with disabilities, who are at the greatest risk of dropping out of school in order to provide them with cash transfers and other forms of help.

7. CONCLUSION

South Asian countries were making progress toward the SDG education targets before the pandemic, but access and quality remained severe concerns and it is doubtful all countries will be able to attain SDG 4 by 2030. Since 2000, enrolment has risen, with more girls attending school and the dropout rate falling. Despite this progress, 31.8 million children, mostly of secondary-school age, are out of school. Current progress in enrolling out-of-school children is inadequate to fulfil the 2030 SDG objective for primary or lower secondary school. Only 69 per cent of young children in the region have access to pre-primary schooling. Pre-pandemic, 58 per cent of youngsters could not read an age-appropriate literature text by age ten. This is despite the fact that all Education Sector Plans and national education priorities contain a quality pillar that outlines how the nation should address low learning results.

When countries began responding to the threat of COVID-19 and went into lockdown, it was inevitable that the majority of learners would be impacted by the closure of schools, and that learning from home would be a difficult alternative for many students due to the digital divide, a lack of quiet spaces to study in, and external pressures on families that negatively impacted the amount of time learners were able to devote to studying. As a result of school closures and a lack of access to distant learning resources, countries' future cognitive capital were weakened. In a similar fashion, money planned for the education sector have been redirected to other areas, such as health, while support from other nations will be curtailed due to the strains on their own budgets. South Asia faces a double obstacle in generating the additional funds required to remedy the consequences of COVID-19 on education systems that were already off track with respect to meeting SDG 4 goals.

In general, nations responded swiftly to the pandemic by closing schools and finding distant learning alternatives. Nonetheless, this research found that there were significant disparities in the quality of education service, and that the absence of monitoring posed a difficulty for governments attempting to reach all children with the response and to determine participation and learning levels. Therefore, enhanced relationships with the NGO and commercial sectors, as well as cross-sectoral collaboration, are important for comprehensive provisions in the future.

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