Learning in times of lockdown: how Covid-19 is affecting education and food security in India

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Abstract
A vast majority of the relief and rehabilitation packages announced in the months following the nationwide lockdown in India have focused on economic rehabilitation. However, the education sector has remained absent from this effort, including in India’s central government’s 250 billion dollar stimulus package. In this paper, we discuss the implications of lockdown-induced school and rural child-care center closures on education and health outcomes for the urban and rural poor. We especially focus on food and nutritional security of children who depend on school feeding and supplementary nutrition programs. We argue that the impacts are likely to be much more severe for girls as well as for children from already disadvantaged ethnic and caste groups. We also discuss ways in which existing social security programs can be leveraged and strengthened to ameliorate these impacts.

Keywords School feeding programs · Covid-19 · Education · Maternal nutrition · Nutrition security · Child health · Gender

With India slowly starting to open its economy back up, following months of nationwide Covid-19 induced lockdown, schools and colleges across the country have now been shut for over three months. Even as the lockdown ends, it is unlikely that educational institutions will re-open for months. This closure has come at a critical point in the education calendar of India, marked by school final assessments, school leaving examinations and entrance tests for undergraduate and post-graduate courses. What does this disruption imply for students across the socio-economic spectrum, both in terms of learning outcomes and food and economic security, and how can policymakers mitigate these impacts? In this article we discuss some of the consequences of the lockdown on the education sector and the steps that have been taken by various state and central bodies to address these. Finally, we suggest ways in which existing social security nets and provisions can be strengthened to support young and school-age children affected by the lockdown.

1 Impact on dropout rates
According to UNESCO, approximately 0.32 billion students in India have been affected by school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO 2020). Of these, almost 84% reside in rural areas while 70% attend government schools. As of 2015, the average dropout rate across secondary schools in India was 17.06% with higher numbers for rural areas (NUEPA 2016). Past evidence suggests that short term disruptions in schooling often lead to permanent dropouts among the poor (Reddy and Sinha 2010). One reason for this is the loss of parents’ employment for which child labour is leveraged as a substitute. The inevitable economic backlash of the lockdown is likely to reduce the earning capacity for many poor households and may increase the opportunity cost of sending children to school, especially in rural India. As a result, children may be pushed into the labour market (Bharadwaj et al. 2019).

Dropout rates are likely to be even more severe for girls who are often left out of household resource allocation decisions (Prakash et al. 2017). Girls may also be required to undertake additional household responsibilities as parents increase their own labour hours to cope with economic distress. Similarly, these economic shocks are likely to have a greater impact on children from communities that are marginalized on the basis of their caste, tribe and religion, and already experience higher dropout rates (NUEPA 2016). Dropping out, in
turn, may lead to increases in child marriages, domestic vio-
lence, early pregnancies and a plethora of other development
issues (Birchall 2018). Without school fee waivers in the in-
terim, dropout rates are likely to get further exacerbated as
educational expenses become unaffordable for many.
Although some states governments such as those of
Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and
Jharkhand tried to initiate waivers for tuition and other school
expenses during the lockdown period, private schools were
unwilling to implement these measures.

2 Impact on inequality and disparity

A key step taken by some educational institutions to ensure
continuation of curriculum has been to shift lectures online,
requiring both students and teachers to use personal home
computers and reliable internet. If school and university ex-
aminations happen as scheduled, without compensatory clas-
ses, it is likely to disadvantage students who cannot access
these computer and network resources. However, postpone-
ment of examinations can cause a delay for students in enter-
ing the job market.

The discourse on education during the lockdown period
has been essentially focused on online or televised learning.
In fact, the only mention of education in the Government of
India’s USD 260 billion fiscal stimulus package is in the con-
text of online and digital learning platforms. A number of
Indian states including Mizoram, West Bengal and Kashmir
have implemented daily televised lectures as the Human
Resource Development (education) Ministry ties up with tele-
vision service providers to allocate specific channels for this
purpose. However, these measures preclude the rural and ur-
ban poor with limited or no access to electricity and network
resources. Moreover, online classes are being facilitated large-
ly for students who attend urban private schools, and already
outperform government school students on most indicators of
learning (Annual Status of Education Report 2018). The
higher use of online learning platforms by private schools will
increase this disparity.

3 Impact on nutrition and food security

One of the most important consequences of the lockdown and
subsequent school closures has been the temporary suspen-
sion of mid-day meals and supplementary nutrition programs,
which has widespread and important implications for the nu-
trition and food security of children across the nation. The
Mid-day Meal (MDM) program in India is the largest school
feeding program in the world (World Food Programme 2013),
catering to about 144 million children, with approximately
80% coverage across primary school students (Chowdhury
2019). This flagship program aims to provide cooked meals
to all government primary school children, meeting a stipulat-
ed minimum calorie and protein requirement. Yet, nearly half
of all Indian children are undernourished, both in terms of
weight-for-age as well as height-for-age, with girls dispropor-
tionately affected (IIPS and ICF 2017). Despite regional dis-
parities in outreach and food quality, MDMs have been found
to significantly improve enrolment, attendance, retention,
learning outcomes, gender and social equity and most impor-
tantly nutrition (Afridi 2011; Sarma et al. 1995; Singh et al.
2014; Aurino et al. 2019). The MDM program, besides elimi-
inating classroom hunger, also addresses health issues such as
micronutrient deficiencies and mass deworming. In case of
economically disadvantaged families, MDM’s school meals
act more as a substitute rather than a complementary meal,
protecting against endemic hunger for the entire family. The
months of lockdown in India have already caused supply
chain disruptions in the agriculture sector, leading to food
shortages (Reardon et al. 2020). Interruption in school feeding
programs is thus likely to exacerbate food insecurity, particu-
larly for those who are already under-nourished, especially
girls, who like older women, eat last and eat less at home,
compared to boys and men.

Similarly, disruption in the supplementary nutrition pro-
gram delivered under the Integrated Child Development
Services (ICDS) Scheme is likely to affect over 100 million
pregnant and lactating mothers, and children under the age of
6, who rely on Anganwadi centres (rural child care centres) for
both cooked meals and take home rations to meet basic nutri-
tional needs. Lack of access to school feeding and supplemen-
tary nutrition programs is likely to further endanger already
precarious food security for urban and rural poor, which may
have long term health and economic impacts.

4 What is the way forward?

Policy makers and educators in other countries have
responded in different ways to minimize the impact of the
disruptions on students across all levels of education. In
China, a country India often finds itself compared to, econom-
ically disadvantaged students are being provided mobile data
and computer subsidies to tide through the lockdown. The
Global Partnership for Education has recently announced a
$250 million fund to help 67 developing countries (excluding
India) cope with immediate and long-term disruptions to ed-
ucation as a result of the pandemic (GPE 2020). This fund, to
be utilized with a special focus on girls and poor children,
aims to encourage investments in learning resources that will
reach those who will most likely be unable to resume learning
when schools reopen.

In India too, local solutions by several state governments
have been implemented, but there is scope for much more.
Home delivered meals/dry ration to school and Angadwadi children in certain southern states (Kerala, Telangana, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh) have benefited millions of children and expecting mothers already. Other measures including data packages for students, TV broadcasted classes and regular SMS/IVR to parents for daily activities with children are currently underway.

Moving forward, the immediate need is to expand access to nutritious food for all children eligible for school feeding programs nationwide. In addition, re-directing locally produced horticultural crops to households under the MDM and ICDS umbrella can help improve nutrient content and diet diversity for children and provide temporary relief to farmers through local procurement, an idea that has proven to be successful in other contexts (Singh and Fernandes 2018).

Along with interventions in the education sector, initiatives are also needed to cushion the economic impact on poor families to discourage the use of child labour along with monitoring mechanisms set up to ensure children remain in school, whenever they re-open. There is also the issue of mental stress and trauma that young children may be facing, both as a result of reduced mobility due to the lockdown and the economic stress being faced by families-an issue that has remained largely absent from the current discourse. In such a context, collaborative effort between the public sector, the private sector, and the civil society would be critical for educational and social rehabilitation of affected children. As health and economy occupies the centre stage, educational and nutritional considerations must not be forgotten so as to not undo the hard-earned gains in these sectors over the past few decades.

Data Availability Not applicable.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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