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USING THE CAPABILITY APPROACH TO MINIMIZE THE LEARNING LOSS OF SCHOOL CHILDREN DUE TO THE PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The Covid 19 pandemic has reaped havoc in the world, depriving people of their means of livelihood and education and posing challenges to the existing health care infrastructure in the world. This in turn has resulted in deterioration of human development leading to human insecurities due to illness and deaths in huge numbers caused by the corona virus, unemployment and poverty, illiteracy and learning disablement. This paper looks at the effect of the pandemic on deprivation of education of children during the pandemic, which is tantamount to deprivation of capabilities. This serious problem may be solved using the Capability approach of Nobel laureate, Prof. Amartya Sen, whereby the combination of individual characteristics, access to resources and the lived environment interact to affect a person's opportunity to be and do the things they value, in this case, to be educated.

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Introduction

During these pandemic times, children of poor households are left out from online education because of not being able to afford smart phones and non-availability of data connectivity and electricity. Children in primary classes, who are first generation learners in the family are the most badly affected since parental support was lacking resulting in Learning Poverty (as the World Bank refers to). Young rural schoolgirls who very often naturally are victims of gender discrimination are married off since they were not attending school. Inevitably, drop-outs increased during the pandemic, particularly in respect of girl children. Children who lost their parent/s due to covid were hugely

disadvantaged. Children were deprived of nutritious diet when dry ration to the family was substituted for mid-day meals.

In urban areas, children had access to online education and parental support very often, however online learning has its own challenges in the form of lack of communication with the teacher and other class students. Is this form of education viable at the tender age when interaction with peers and play is a part of school routine and contributes towards making learning enjoyable and easy? Are children able to gain from this system to the full extent as in an offline system? I have spoken to children and

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parents and have found that since there is no other option with schools closed, this system had to be accepted with parents often sitting beside their ward in primary classes and supporting them in their new learning process as their teachers taught them. Face to face interaction seems to be the way out.

Can we provide capabilities to school children so that they are able to cope with the learning loss that has happened in the two years of the pandemic? We have enough information and resources by now to cope with this mammoth challenge facing school education. Understanding the requirements of children with different intelligence quotient levels in a world of inequity is necessary to bring about improvement in teaching methods during this pandemic which is expected to drag on for a few more years- by providing opportunities that will enable students to utilise their capabilities to the best, in their learning process. This is where the Capability approach of Prof. Amartya Sen comes into the picture.

Already we are approaching the completion of two years of the pandemic. Educational organizations like the UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank have conducted studies across the world, observed the patterns emerging from the online system of education and supported Governments to counter the challenges that the education system faces today. NGOs are coming together to take on this struggle to ensure normalcy in the lives of children. If this is not done now, human insecurity will cripple millions of lives resulting in massive increase in unemployment and poverty in the future.

This generation of students now risks losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value, or about 14 percent of today’s global GDP, due to the COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures, according to a new report published in December 2021 by the World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF.


Literature Review

The Capability approach of Prof. Amartya Sen refers to the set of valuable functionings that a person has effective access to. Thus, a person’s capability represents the effective freedom of an individual to choose between different functioning combinations – between different kinds of life – that she has reason to value. Sen talks about the capabilities of literacy, health and political freedom.

The role of education in human security has been extensively dealt with by Sen in his capability approach. Sen says, “Human security is integrally connected with securing human capability, and thus applies directly to the contribution of education in removing the “downside risks” among the general class of objectives included under the broad hat of human development. Human security stands, thus, on the shoulders of human development with a particular adaptation of its rich vision and perspective, and this applies especially strongly to the critical role of elementary education.”

In this context, mention must be made of Sen’s work on human capabilities together with the human development concept pioneered by Dr Mahbub ul Haq that led to the Human Development Index (HDI), first used in the 1990 Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Programme. Other than life expectancy at birth and gross national income per capita, the HDI has incorporated the education component comprising of mean years of schooling and expected years of schooling as a measure to track changes in development levels over time and compare development levels in different countries.

Sen says that the responsibility to provide basic education to help satisfy the right to security (rather than keeping people exposed to illiteracy and innumeracy) is central to the understanding

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of the demands of human security. Social obligation must not, of course, be confused with the role of the state alone: the solicitation applies to all institutions and agencies that can help to promote human rights and reduce human insecurity. The agencies involved can be national and international, public and private, formalized and informal, and so on. What links them together is the common need to recognize the value of basic education and the normative change to cater to it. The demands are moral and social - not legal or bureaucratic. (Sen, 2002)


Applicability of the Capabilities approach to arrive at a solution to impart education during the pandemic

Harold Kuombola, Country Director, Link Community Development Malawi and Kate Sykes, International Programme Manager, Link Education International writes about the Capabilities response to remote learning during the covid 19 pandemic in Malawi, Africa - Drawing on work by Amartya Sen and Sophie Mitra, the project is framed within a capability approach whereby the combination of individual characteristics, access to resources and the lived environment interact to affect a person's opportunity to be and do the things they value, in this case, to be educated. Using a capability framework helps us understand how a learner's multiple identities in the context of cultural differences, knowledge gaps and socioeconomic status intersect to create educational marginalisation, rather than looking at the barriers in isolation. On that basis, we can design a holistic project which addresses the multiple barriers faced by marginalised learners. In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Malawi government closed all schools and learning centres in March 2020. They remained closed for six months until Sept 2020, when they reopened in phases, before another five-

week closure in early 2021. Distance learning provision relied on students proactively accessing centrally created lessons through technology such as the internet and radio. However, such an approach did not meet the needs of the most educationally marginalised children, who required holistic support for barriers arising from their individual characteristics, available resources and lived environment.

The project used a capability framework to develop three key innovations to support inclusion, equity and quality while learning centres were closed. First, a paper-based mode of delivery was complemented by in-person facilitator support. We provided home learning packs, including books, worksheets, pens and paper, and re-trained Central Board of Education (CBE) facilitators to support home learning. Facilitators met their learners once a week in groups of three or four at a suitable and easily accessible location within the community. In-person teaching was achieved as safely as possible by teaching in small groups to allow for social distancing. Masks, additional handwashing facilities and extra staff training in line with government guidelines were also provided. Facilitators supported students to complete home learning journals to reflect on their learning progress and helped them with any challenges they faced.

Secondly, the lesson content prioritised resilience and socio-emotional skills as the foundation for learning, and teachers adapted the core curriculum (numeracy, Chichewa, English and Lifeskills) to individual learning needs. 21% of learners reported feeling more anxious, so in addition to academic work, facilitators covered COVID-19 prevention and emotional resilience activities. The number of subjects were reduced in the curriculum to focus more on core subjects like literacy, numeracy and life skills.

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Thirdly, the facilitators’ roles were expanded to include child protection and community engagement, focusing on safeguarding the importance of education. Facilitators also provided information to parents and community members about how to help students to continue learning while at home. They also visited learners with disabilities at home to discuss any additional support needs with them and their parents. (Kuombola, Sykes, 2021)

Learning Poverty in developing countries
Many of India’s estimated 260 million school children, especially the younger learners, have suffered heavy learning losses in the pandemic. Students, as they come back to school, will be facing enormous learning deficit (Kazmin, 2021). School closure has not only resulted in academic losses, but also led to developmental delays, nutritional deficiency, eyesight problems and mental health problems. In addition to widening the already existing socio-economic gap in the education system of the country, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation by affecting the Midday Meal scheme (MDMS). Most states have provided dry rations to the family. A scheme such as the MDMS is crucial to a country like India for multiple reasons. Various studies have shown that a well-structured school-feeding programme enables the students to catch up in their growth and acts as an incentive for the parents to send their children to school, especially the girl children. The scheme is also critical considering that the country still faces acute conditions of malnutrition and undernourishment. As the latest released

phase I data of National Family Health Survey 5 suggests, the under-five stunted or chronic malnutrition has not shown any improvement over the last half a decade (Mishra, 2021) Even before the pandemic in 2019, the World Bank’s new Learning Poverty indicator


estimated that 55 per cent of India’s 10-year-olds were unable to read a basic sentence, compared with 15 per cent in Sri Lanka and China. India’s own draft education policy suggested that as many as 50 million primary students had failed to achieve basic literacy skills, limiting their ability to learn even if they appear to be progressing through the school system.

The COVID-19 pandemic could drive up learning poverty, the share of 10-year-olds who cannot read a basic text, to around 70 percent in low- and middle-income countries, according to preliminary analysis from an upcoming World Bank report. This rise is a result of the prolonged school closures and poor learning outcomes despite government efforts to deliver remote learning. In many of these countries, schools have been closed for as many as 200 to 250 days, and many have yet to reopen.

This comes nearly 5 years after the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). What’s more worrying is that despite multiple interventions across countries, at the current rate of improvement, 43% of kids will still be ‘learning-poor’ by 2030.

“The losses in education are one part of the dramatic human capital reversals that are threatening this generation. It is both a moral and economic imperative for us to take action,” said Mamta Murthi, Vice President for Human Development at the World Bank. *“Countries must implement ambitious and aggressive plans at scale to recover these losses, with a sharp focus on the most disadvantaged populations, particularly girls, children with disabilities, and those in poorer families.”*

Simulations estimating that school closures resulted in significant learning losses are now being corroborated by real data. For example, regional evidence from Brazil, Pakistan, rural India, South Africa, and Mexico, among others,

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show substantial losses in math and reading. Analysis shows that in some countries, on average, learning losses are roughly Barring a few exceptions, the general trends from emerging evidence around the world align with the findings from Mexico, suggesting that the crisis has exacerbated inequities in education (World Bank-UNESCO-UNICEF report, Dec 2021)

- Children from low-income households, children with disabilities, and girls were less likely to access remote learning than their peers. This was often due to lack of accessible technologies and the availability of electricity, connectivity, and devices, as well as discrimination and gender norms.
- Younger students had less access to remote learning and were more affected by learning loss than older students, especially among pre-school age children in pivotal learning and development stages.
- The detrimental impact on learning has disproportionately affected the most marginalized or vulnerable. Learning losses were greater for students of lower socioeconomic status in countries like Ghana, Mexico, and Pakistan.
- Initial evidence points to larger losses among girls, as they are quickly losing the protection that schools and learning offers to their well-being and life chances.

Support by Institutions in response to the crisis
In response to the deepening education crisis, the World Bank has rapidly ramped up its support to developing countries, with projects reaching at least 432 million students and 26 million teachers – one-third of the student

population and nearly a quarter of the teacher workforce in current client countries. The World Bank is the largest source of external financing for education in developing countries. In the last two fiscal years, their support to education has reached \$11.5 billion. The report highlights that, to date, less than 3 percent of governments’ stimulus packages have been allocated to education. Much more funding will be needed for immediate learning recovery. The report also notes that while nearly every country in the world offered remote learning opportunities for students, the quality and reach of such initiatives differed – in most cases, they offered, at best, a rather partial substitute for in-person instruction. More than 200 million learners live in low- and lower middle-income countries that were unprepared to deploy remote learning during emergency school closures. As part of the report, Mission: Recovering Education 2021, the World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF are focused on three priorities: bringing all children back to schools, recovering learning losses, and preparing and supporting teachers.

- Availability of technology is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective remote learning:
- Teachers are more critical than ever: Support to develop digital and pedagogical tools to teach effectively both in remote and in-person settings.
- Education is an intense human interaction endeavour: For remote learning to be successful it needs to allow for meaningful two-way interaction between students and their teachers; such interactions can be enabled by using the most appropriate technology for the local context.

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- Parents as key partners of teachers
- Leverage on a dynamic ecosystem of collaboration: Ministries of Education need to work in close coordination with other entities working in education (multi-lateral, public, private, academic) to effectively orchestrate different players and to secure the quality of the overall learning experience.
- One earmarked Swayam Prabha TV channel per class from Class 1 to 12 (one class, one channel).
- Extensive use of Radio, Community radio and CBSE Podcast- Shiksha Vani.
- Special e-content for visually and hearing impaired developed on Digitally Accessible Information System (DAISY) and in sign language on NIOS website/ YouTube.

The Indian scenario

During COVID-19 pandemic, Government of India has held various consultations with the States and Union Territories, at different levels. Also, a brain-storming session was held with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in January,2021 for taking their views/perspectives to assess and to bridge the learning gap in the Covid-19 pandemic period.

Education is in the concurrent list of the Constitution and majority of the schools are under the domain of respective State and UT Governments. However, to ensure that every student gets continued access to education, a multi-pronged approach has been adopted. A comprehensive initiative called PM e-VIDYA has been initiated as part of Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan on 17th May,2020, which unifies all efforts related to digital/online/on-air education to enable multi-mode access to education. The initiative includes:

- DIKSHA (one nation, one digital platform) is the nation’s digital infrastructure for providing quality e-content for school education in states/UTs and QR coded Energized Textbooks for all grades are available on it. 35 of the 36 states and UTs have on boarded on DIKSHA platform and contextualised the content as per the local need.

In India, 15 NGOs are working together to improve the school education situation during the pandemic. The group converged on three major challenges to resolve on a priority basis, as they worked towards re-imagining education: Learning loss due to missed and forgotten learning during school closures, threat of continued disruptions even when schools reopen, increased inequity in access to education.


The key recommendations that emerged from the group, for all education stakeholders – the government system and NGOs – to together work on, are as follows:

Ensure equitable access to school: Reduce school dropouts and ensure demand for education is not lowered, by designing targeted interventions, especially for marginalized groups of children who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic

Rebuild for safety and increase instruction time: Upgrade school infrastructure to abide by COVID- 19 safety protocols and increase effective, in-person instructional time by reducing the number of holidays and freeing up teachers’ time from administrative tasks

Slowly ease children back into school through readiness programs: Institutionalize school readiness programs for all children to gently re-induct them into social interactions while addressing their socio-emotional needs

Focus on foundational learning: Prioritize attainment of foundational literacy and

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numeracy (FLN) skills for all children before they start learning other subjects

Restructure what children are learning and how they are learning: Reduce the core curriculum to a minimal, viable set of learning outcomes and spread it over multiple years to ensure every cohort of students gets at least two to three years to compensate for missed and forgotten learning instead of a mere two to three months' remediation period

Identify where children are and meet them at their level: Leverage regular low-stakes assessments as a tool to identify the exact learning needs of each child and design teaching to meet them at their level

Redefine the role of teachers and teacher mentors

Partner with parents as enablers of learning at home

Identify and mobilize community volunteers: To reach every child, learning needs to be decentralized and taken to the communities by identifying and building local capacities to ensure learning continues despite disruptions

Decentralize decision making: Empower district and block officials to take localized and responsive decisions on school structures, instructional calendar, and opening and closing schools, to counter the impact of varying regional disruptions

Conclusion

The economic losses of learning losses will be higher for disadvantaged students, resulting in higher income polarization in the coming decades (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2020).

India and the developing world can cope with the learning issues of children by adopting the Capabilities approach. When the Government of India and NGOs talk about the special needs of the marginalised groups, the personal attention to be given to each child, redefining the roles of


teachers and engaging parents as partners and enablers in the process, it is the Capabilities approach that is being adhered to. Only time will tell whether the implementation of the new process of education, keeping in mind the needs of each student will help reverse learning losses.

Before the pandemic, the Indian state of Gujarat, betting on big data analysis and machine learning, set up state-of-the-art digital-support centres for schools. When schools closed, Gujarat was able to respond quickly by distributing material digitally and personalizing remote education to the learning level of each student. By investing in learning recovery and using technology wisely, it is possible to use the pandemic experience as a catalyst to improve education for all children.

(H.Fore, D. Malpass, 2021)

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