



The impact of COVID-19 on access to education in Nepal

1. Introduction

To prevent the spread of the COVID-19 disease, the majority of governments around the world have resorted to nationwide or localised lockdowns, including the closure of schools. As a result, more than one billion children around the world are currently out of school and in need of alternative forms of education.¹ UNDP warns that the consequences of the pandemic can set back the school attendance rates to before 1980, thereby effectively annulling 30 years of progress.² Quick reactions of education stakeholders are crucial to prevent long-term negative effects on education causing loss of learning in the short term, and in some cases permanent drop-out.

Countries with lower learning outcomes and high drop-out rates in general are particularly vulnerable to the impact of school closures. Three consequences of crises and related school closures have been identified to directly cause the disproportionate loss of learning and drop-out rates among vulnerable children, namely:

- Family poverty and loss of income;
- Increased child labour; and
- Increased child marriages (particularly affecting girls).

UNDP has recently estimated that 86% of children from low human development countries are not receiving education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to “only” 20% of children in developed countries.³ When studying the Ebola outbreak consequences on education in low-income countries, the World Bank noted that children from poorer families had less access to opportunities for (online) learning during school closure.⁴ Aside from general poverty, the increased unemployment and loss of income of families due to COVID-19 is expected to disproportionately affect the learning opportunities of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. UNESCO warns for an increased level of drop-out around the world as parents may not be able to afford costs related to education or simply require children to work for addition income.⁵

A report by the International Cocoa Initiative demonstrated a clear causal link between family income, access to school and child labour. When children are out-of-school and family income drops, the share of child labour significantly increases.⁶ Child labour is a key barrier for children to access education and is

¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, data retrieved for 10 May 2020.

² UNDP (2020) “COVID-19: Human development on course to decline this year for the first time since 1990” *Accessible via* https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2020/COVID19_Human_development_on_course_to_decline_for_the_first_time_since_1990.html

³ UNDP (2020) “COVID-19: Human development on course to decline this year for the first time since 1990”

⁴ World Bank (2020) “World Bank Education and COVID-19” *Accessible via:*

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/interactive/2020/03/24/world-bank-education-and-covid-19>

⁵ UNESCO (2020) “COVID-19 Education Response: Preparing the reopening of schools” *UNESCO, Paris.*

⁶ International Cocoa Initiative (2020) “The effects of income changes on child labour: A review of evidence from



negatively correlated with youth literacy and enrolment rates. Children involved in child labour less regularly attend school or do not access education at all.⁷ The Ebola outbreak showed that education drop-out in affected countries caused an upsurge in child labour, mainly attributed to increased domestic and care responsibilities.⁸ The World Economic Forum warns that the COVID-19 may cause a worldwide escalation of child labour as well.⁹

A similar link was found in relation to school closures and child marriage. The organization Girls Not Brides listed that a lack of access to education and loss of income are key factors contributing to child marriage, particularly in emergency situations, as witnessed during the Ebola outbreak. Forced marriage generally means the end of a girl's formal education career.¹⁰ COVID-19 school closures are likely to contribute to an increase in child marriages, which in turn contributes to the permanent drop-out of girls.

Although the COVID-19 global pandemic is unprecedented, the education community can learn from prior experiences (e.g. looking at lessons of Ebola crisis). The key priority is to prevent the loss of human capital by minimizing as much as possible the drop-out rates of children and by keeping them engaged in schooling throughout the period of closure.

2. Access to education in Nepal

In the past decades, Nepal has witnessed significant improvements in access to education for children across the country. In fact, the current enrolment rate of children in primary education is about 96%, compared to 72% in 2000.¹¹ Additionally, the adult (15+) literacy rate of the Nepali population has grown steadily from 21% in 1981 to 68% in 2018.¹²

Despite this success, UNICEF considers the poor quality of education and the unequal access to education based on remoteness, gender, and socio-economic background as key weaknesses of the present-day education system.¹³ Inequality is a key characteristic of the Nepali society linked to the settlement area (rural / urban), caste and gender of the child. Male children, children from higher castes and from urban areas are far more likely to attain education than female children and children from lower castes and from rural areas.¹⁴ Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to drop out of school or not attending education at all. In fact, 99% of children from the richest quintile have taken part in education,

smallholder agriculture" accessible via https://cocoainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ICI_Lit_Review_Income_ChildLabour_15Apr2020.pdf

⁷ ILO (2015) "Child labour and education: Progress, challenges and future directions" ILO, Geneva.

⁸ UNESCO (2020) "Covid-19 school closures around the world will hit girls hardest" Accessible via: <https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-school-closures-around-world-will-hit-girls-hardest>

⁹ Kunera Moore (2020) "COVID-19 heightens the risk of child labour. This is how we can tackle it" World Economic Forum, accessible via <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/covid-19-heightens-the-risk-of-child-labor-but-there-is-a-path-to-child-labor-free-cocoa/>

¹⁰ Girls Not Brides (2020) "COVID-19 and child, early and forced marriage: An agenda for action" Girls Not Brides, accessible via https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-and-child-early-and-forced-marriage_FINAL-4.pdf

¹¹ World Bank statistics, "School enrollment, primary (% net)" Accessible via <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.NENR>

¹² UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Literacy rate", accessible via <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/np>

¹³ UNICEF. "Education" accessible via <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/education>

¹⁴ Shiba Bagale and Shree Prasad Devkota (2015) "Social Inequality in Nepal and Right of Education" Journal of Poverty, Investment and Development, Vol 8.



compared to 90% of boys and 86% of girls from the lowest quintile. Furthermore, only 18% of children from the lowest caste (Dalit) were enrolled in basic education in 2014.¹⁵

While most children are enrolled in, and complete primary education, enrolment in secondary education is significantly lower (58% of children of the relevant age group in 2019).¹⁶ When children reach the age of receiving a School Leaving Certificate, only 20% of children are still in school and eligible to receive the certificate.¹⁷

Prior research has demonstrated the need for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to contribute to household chores and agricultural work which interferes with their schooling. Furthermore, high costs of books and school materials constitute a key barrier for parents to send their children to school.¹⁸ Several scholarship programmes have been developed to ensure that children can purchase books and other materials needed for school, but this does not address the structural challenge caused by the high poverty rate in Nepal.¹⁹

Other factors influencing attendance and drop-out were found to be the available hygiene infrastructure (i.e. toilets), particularly for girls and the availability or lack of teaching and learning materials in school.²⁰ A USAID representative indicated that an important reason for the discontinuation of education is the perception of parents and children that education does not guarantee employment afterwards.²¹ This demonstrates that, although poverty is the strongest factor influencing drop-out and school attendance, certain other factors play a role as well.

Furthermore, the 2015 earthquake has had a tremendous impact on the education system infrastructure. The Nepali Ministry of Home Affairs noted that 8,620 schools were damaged, and 19,692 classrooms were completely destroyed. In all affected districts, the National Planning Commission noticed an increase in the secondary school drop-out rate of children in the year following the earthquake, to 6%.²² Prior to that, the drop-out rate for secondary education was 5.3%.²³ These findings demonstrate the fragility of the Nepali education systems to unexpected crises.

¹⁵ UNICEF et.al. (2015) "Nepal Education Cluster Earthquake Response Strategy May – Sep 2015" Accessible via https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/nepal_education_cluster_strategy_2015-07-06_0.pdf

¹⁶ World Bank statistics, "School enrollment, secondary (% net)" Accessible via <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.NENR?locations=NP>

¹⁷ Hamza Khan and Tashi Tobgyal (2016) "A year after earthquake: Schools destroyed and reconstruction slow, Nepal struggles to keep kids in class" *The Indian Express*, accessible via: <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/world-news/nepal-earthquake-schools-destroyed-and-reconstruction-slow-nepal-struggles-to-keep-kids-in-class-2770309/>

¹⁸ Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS, 2010-11), and Manandhar, A. & Sthapit, B. (2011) "Logistic Regression Model for Primary School Dropout Children of Chitwan District of Nepal" *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 2(2)

¹⁹ Shree Prasad Devkota and Shiba Bagale (2015) "Primary Education and Dropout in Nepal" *Journal of Education and Practice*, Vol 6, No 4.

²⁰ Binay Kumar Kushiyait (2010) "School Dropout and its Relationship with Quality of Primary Education in Nepal" *The Geographical Journal of Nepal*, Vol. 8, 2010-2011

²¹ Hamza Khan and Tashi Tobgyal (2016) "A year after earthquake: Schools destroyed and reconstruction slow, Nepal struggles to keep kids in class"

²² Hamza Khan and Tashi Tobgyal (2016) "A year after earthquake: Schools destroyed and reconstruction slow, Nepal struggles to keep kids in class"

²³ UNICEF et.al. (2015) "Nepal Education Cluster Earthquake Response Strategy May – Sep 2015"



3. *The impact of COVID-19 on access to education in Nepal*

As shown previously, the education system of Nepal is highly influenced by the poverty and inequality prevailing in the country. As a result, the ability to enjoy education is limited for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. As history has shown, these children are the first to suffer when a disaster takes place. Therefore, it can be predicted that children in rural areas, from lower castes and girl children are most likely to be negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Schools in Nepal have been closed for almost two months at the time this article was written. To limit the negative impact of the pandemic on the learning opportunities of children, the Education Cluster of Nepal²⁴ agreed on two priorities for the sector. Firstly, the spread of COVID-19 through education facilities had to be limited (leading to school closures). Secondly, the continuity of learning had to be ensured in case of a longer period of school closure, through “preparing and pre-positioning of resources (internet, radio, TV, and print) that can be used by children at home”.²⁵ The main tasks foreseen as part of the second priority include the development of self-learning packages (internet, radio, television and print) for children in grades 0-12, and the training of teachers to facilitate distance learning.

However, the planned responses of the Education Cluster will need to take into account the barriers of poverty and inequality and the increased child labour and child marriage risks that have cost many children their education during past health emergencies and crises.

3.1 *Poverty and inequality in education*

As in the case with Ebola, initial World Bank research on the effects of COVID-19 on poverty in Nepal predicts a sharp increase in poverty rates due to the reduction of income from tourism and remittances. People employed in low-income and informal jobs are expected to be hit the hardest.²⁶

Shortly after the school closures, the Nepali government introduced schooling via television for grades 6-10 as part of its “Digital Education System”.²⁷ However, the Sharecast Initiative’s 2017 survey shows that only 72% of households in Nepal own a television. This allows the majority of children to take part in the television classes, but still likely excludes more than a quarter of the student population. Furthermore, the frequent electricity cuts also interfere with access to this form of schooling.²⁸ In fact, in 2012 only 49% of

²⁴ A coordination group involving the Nepali government and major international organisations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the EU, working together on issues related to education.

²⁵ United Nations Nepal (2020) “COVID-19 Nepal: Preparedness and response plan (NPRP)” *accessible via* [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/nepal-documents/novel-coronavirus/covid-19-nepal-preparedness-and-response-plan-\(nprp\)-draft-april-9.pdf?sfvrsn=808a970a_2](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/nepal-documents/novel-coronavirus/covid-19-nepal-preparedness-and-response-plan-(nprp)-draft-april-9.pdf?sfvrsn=808a970a_2)

²⁶ World Bank (2020) “Nepal Must Ramp Up COVID-19 Action to Protect Its People, Revive Economy” *accessible via* <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/11/nepal-must-ramp-up-covid-19-action-to-protect-its-people-revive-economy>

²⁷ “Nepal to Introduce ‘Digital Education’ Amid COVID-19 Lockdown” *Nepali Ansar*, 23 April 2020, *accessible via* <https://www.nepalisansar.com/education/nepal-to-introduce-digital-education-amid-covid-19-lockdown/>

²⁸ Media Landscapes report on Nepal, *accessible via* <https://medialandscapes.org/country/nepal/media/television>



the rural population of Nepal was estimated to have access to electricity, compared to 93% of the urban population.²⁹

Simultaneously, the government invested 70 million rupees (approximately 570,000 USD) to develop and launch online classes. Like the television rate, about 72% of the Nepali population is estimated to have internet access.³⁰ However, this share of population is almost entirely located in urban areas and represent higher-income families. Rural areas also face lower quality of internet connections.³¹ The online classes require 3G internet access which is both costly and largely unavailable in rural areas.³² Furthermore, it remains questionable whether teachers are skilled enough to use online tools for teaching as they face the same internet limitations as their students and have likely not been trained to teach virtual classes.

In an attempt to outreach to vulnerable learners, a liaison initiative has recently been introduced in one Nepali municipality, where teachers and volunteers are being trained to check on pupils twice a week to monitor their progress. The mayor of the municipality indicated that although this approach is not adequate [compared to normal education], schools will not open anytime soon and “..mobilising teachers to students’ doorstep is the only way to engage them in study”.³³ Indeed, a twice-a-week visit may not replace classroom education, but it does provide at least some education opportunities to children from different backgrounds. Moreover, keeping the children engaged may increase their likeliness to return to school when the lockdown has ended.

3.2 Child labour

The International Labour Organisations’ latest data indicates that about 40% of children aged 5 – 17 in Nepal are engaged in work, most of them are below the age of 14 and live in rural areas. In half of the cases, the employment can be classified as “worst form of child labour” meaning that it negatively affects the child’s education, health and overall well-being. Poverty and lack of education are among the key causes of child labour in Nepal.³⁴

The Ebola outbreak caused a huge increase in child labour in affected countries and UNICEF is warning for a similar trend across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁵ As the lockdowns in Nepal have caused

²⁹ Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP) (2012) “Clean Energy Information Portal, Energy Profile Nepal” Accessible via <https://www.reeep.org/nepal-2012>

³⁰ Madhu Sudan Dahal (2020) “Online classes may widen digital divide ... but it will also allow Nepal to leapfrog in education” *Nepali Times*, accessible via <https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/online-classes-may-widen-digital-divide/>

³¹ Nischal Regmi and Martin Chautari (2017) “Expectations versus reality: A case of internet in Nepal” *EJISDC* 82, 7.

³² Madhu Sudan Dahal (2020) “Online classes may widen digital divide ... but it will also allow Nepal to leapfrog in education”

³³ Binod Ghimire (2020) “Tansen Municipality in Palpa to mobilise teachers at students’ doorsteps with no sign of school resumption” *Kathmandu Post*, accessible via https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/05/23/tansen-municipality-in-palpa-to-mobilise-teachers-at-students-doorsteps-with-no-sign-of-school-resumption?fbclid=IwAR2XGrDZrq6w96OmWm2aSWIEsraMGDiRcHRYIOqff7_pu3-0AQhY5q5LTU

³⁴ ILO Nepal (2012) “Eliminating child labour in Nepal: facts, figures, commitments and action” *ILO*, accessible via https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--asia/--ro-bangkok/--ilo-kathmandu/documents/projectdocumentation/wcms_182777.pdf

³⁵ UNICEF (2020) “Don’t let children be the hidden victims of COVID-19 pandemic” *Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore*, accessible via <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/press-releases/dont-let-children-be-hidden-victims-covid-19-pandemicunicef>



heightened poverty, it can be expected that children will drop out of school to support their parents with income-related activities and continue engaging in child labour once the schools have reopened.

Based on the experience with the Ebola outbreak and the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, girls are predicted to disproportionately suffer from the school closures. The ILO data found that girls are more often involved in child labour than boys, and 60% of children involved in hazardous work are girls.³⁶ Girls are also expected to care for (sick) relatives, elderly and out-of-school siblings which prevents them from accessing alternative learning tools such as the online classes. In fact, the United Nations considered this specifically in their COVID-19 preparedness and response plan, referring to the likely increasing gender gap in education.³⁷

3.3. Child marriage

The evidence from prior crises suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to cause a surge in poverty and related child marriages, thereby ending the educational careers of adolescent girls. Although child marriage is officially prohibited in Nepal, UNICEF calculated in 2017 that 40% of girls were married before the age of 18 and 7% even before the age of 15.³⁸ As shown earlier, marriage at an early age often constitutes the end of the educational career of a girl. In fact, UNICEF reported that a married girl is ten times less likely to attend school compared to her unmarried peers.³⁹

Unfortunately, the lack of access to education is a strong factor influencing child marriage in Nepal. Attending school is a key factor – in many countries – protecting girls from early marriage. The danger of the COVID-19 school closures is therefore that the share of child marriages may increase, which subsequently prevents girls from returning to education after the restrictions have lifted.⁴⁰

4. Conclusion and suggestions to address the challenges

Global history of school closures and the impact of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal have demonstrated that access to education during a crisis is disproportionately diminished for vulnerable children. The COVID-19 pandemic is therefore expected to gravely affect the educational future of numerous children in Nepal. Aside from the increasing educational gap between children who have access to television and internet and those who do not, other potential consequences of the COVID-19 school closures are at this stage subject to theory.

In first instance, the school closure will cause a loss of learning opportunities for children from disadvantaged families and remote areas, particularly girls, who are unable to access or fully benefit from the alternative education opportunities provided by the government or (international) organisations. Consequently, the effect of the self-learning packages, teacher training and virtual classes presented by the Education Cluster remains to be seen. The plan does not provide concrete plans to reach children in

³⁶ILO Nepal (2012) "Eliminating child labour in Nepal: facts, figures, commitments and action"

³⁷ United Nations Nepal (2020) "COVID-19 Nepal: Preparedness and response plan (NPRP)"

³⁸ Girls Not Brides country report on Nepal, accessible via <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/nepal/>

³⁹ UNICEF and UNFPA (2016) "Ending child marriage in Nepal" UNICEF and UNFPA, accessible via <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/401/file/Ending%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20Nepal.pdf>

⁴⁰ Smita Sharma (2016) "'Our time to sing and play': Child marriage in Nepal" Human Rights Watch, accessible via <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/08/our-time-sing-and-play/child-marriage-nepal>



remote areas, to monitor the engagement of children with their studies and does not address girls as a particular vulnerable group in this regard (although the plan does include “marginalized children” as as one of the target groups when designing alternative educational resources).

When schools reopen, a second wave of inequal impact will be visible when some children return to school and some drop out permanently. These are the children whose families are no longer (financially) able to send their children to school, those children who have engaged into child labour, and those children – mainly girls – who got married. Child labour and child marriage are still a common form of child abuse in Nepal and research has demonstrated a clear link between lack of access to education and subsequent increases in child labour and child marriage. In turn, child labour and child marriage prevent children from returning to education.

Therefore, educational response plans need to focus not only on the compensation of the loss of learning, but particularly on enforcing the return of children to education once the school closures have lifted. As this article has shown, this will require the efforts of an interdisciplinary group of stakeholders who not only involved in education, but also in child protection, employment, and social welfare.

5. *How can we help?*

One of the main pillars of the work of Volunteers Initiative Nepal is “Child Development”. For this reason, VIN implements a variety of projects with schools in the communities that increase children’s access to education and their awareness of children’s rights.

To mitigate the potential negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis as presented above, there are two activities of VIN that could be upscaled and supported!

1. *VIN’s teacher training.* A recent survey among schools in Tarkeswore district demonstrated that not all schools closely monitor the absence of their pupils. When children drop-out, schools are not always able to trace them. Since VIN already conducted teacher trainings on a variety of topics, a future training should include the monitoring and tracking of children’s absence and drop-out and how to deal with parents and guardians in these situations.
2. *VIN’s sponsorship programme.* VIN supports children from marginalized background to access school by providing them with the necessary school materials. This prevents parents from keeping children at home in case they lack funds to purchase books or school uniforms. As presented above, poverty is a key factor contributing to drop-out during an emergency situation. Therefore, together with the trained teachers as presented above, VIN can identify families who are worst affected by COVID-19 and sponsor children to return to school after the closure!

If you want to help VIN to train teachers and sponsor more children to go to school, please send us your donation here: gf.me/u/x7abz4