

## Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Children in Jharkhand

### A. BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to unprecedented challenges and crises that brought life to a standstill across the globe. The effect of the pandemic on the children has been the most severe, as many of their rights including that of life, protection, participation, and education have been difficult to fulfil. It is in this context that on the behest of Tata Trust, the Council for Social Development (CSD) conducted a study to examine the impact of the ongoing pandemic on the lives and education of rural children in the four states of Jharkhand, Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. Based on the information generated from the field, the Council for Social Development made actionable recommendations that include short-term and long-term solutions so that children can resume their schooling in the post-pandemic era with confidence and success.

In Jharkhand, the primary survey was conducted in mid-February 2022 and covered the Khunti and Murhu blocks of Khunti district and the Lohardaga block of Lohardaga district. Survey schedule, focus group discussion (FGD), and open-ended interviews were conducted to record information from 300 parents, 300 children, 30 teachers, 30 Anganwadi workers, 4 schools, and other stakeholders such as government officials, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), School Management Committee (SMC) members and elected representatives of panchayats. The key findings of the study are discussed in this policy brief.

### B. KEY FINDINGS

#### I. Effect of Pandemic on the Family and Children

- **Socio-Economic Impact:** A large number of parents in Murhu were self-employed in agriculture, while in Khunti and Lohardaga, they mostly worked as casual labourers. During off-seasons, they migrated to Ranchi for domestic work, construction work, etc. During the lockdown period, 9 out of 10 parents said that they had lost their livelihood and nearly one-third of the casual labourers became unemployed. This initial setback was overcome slowly by February-March 2022; however, the families had slipped on the income ladder.
- **Impact on Children:** The adverse economic situation of the family had a negative impact on the children. There were 18 cases of dropouts from the families that lost their livelihood. Of these, 11 children had dropped out to contribute to family income and the remaining to handle chores and sibling care. Nearly, 60 per cent of the parents stated that their children accompanied them to work during school closure and were engaged in potato cultivation, cattle rearing, poultry care, etc.
- **Gender Differences:** A difference in the gender role was noted in the kind of work undertaken by boys and girls and more proportion of boys (25 per cent) than girls (15 per cent) engaged in running errands and income-generating activities. The girls were engaged in domestic work.
- **Health and Nutrition of Children:** In Lohardaga, 51 per cent of the parents said that their children over-ate. The problem of nutrition deficiency did not arise, as most of the parents were engaged in cultivation and food availability was not an issue. Though the Anganwadi workers (AWWs) reported of regular supply of nutritional supplements to young children, only 5 per cent of the parents said they had received the same. About 65 per cent of the parents said that they received MDM as take-home rations (THR) regularly.

- *Wellbeing of Children:* Half of the parents interviewed said that their children suffered from increased stress levels and anxiety and one-third of the parents were worried that their children were not getting enough physical activity. In Khunti 17 per cent of the parents complained that their children's social interaction had decreased while in Murhu 16 per cent said that their children suffered from disturbed sleeping patterns. Despite such a negative impact on their well-being, 70 per cent affirmed that during the closure period they were able to build better bonding and spend quality time with their children.
- *Protection of Children:* About 10 per cent of the children in the Khunti district reported that their friends and fellow students in their known circle had got married during the school closure. During FGD with parents, it came out that the increase in insecurity about life and finance led to an increase in child marriage during the pandemic times.

## II. Effect of Pandemic on the Education of Children

### 1. Education during School Closure

- *Effect of School Closure:* School closure from March 2020 to September 2021 for almost 18 months had severely impacted children's education, affecting their discipline and everyday routine. More than 65 per cent of the parents affirmed that their children's education had got affected because of school closure. Factors such as distraction, chores, and lack of monitoring mechanisms at home impacted their education.
- *Disruption in School Infrastructure:* Schools in the Naxalite area of Khunti had no boundary walls and gates. About 35 per cent of the parents expressed concerns about the dilapidated condition of school infrastructure in the post-pandemic phase. They complained about the poor condition of school toilets, school building and classrooms.
- *Teacher Shortage:* In the surveyed government schools, the head teachers said the shortage of teachers was a major problem. To overcome this problem, the NGOs engaged local youths as volunteers to teach the children.
- *Teacher Activities during School Closure:* About one-third of the teachers were engaged in COVID-19 vaccination drives, activities related to the distribution of rations, and ensuring physical distancing during the peak pandemic period. Nearly, 70 per cent of the teachers said that they shared educational content, YouTube links and activities with children through WhatsApp. To find out about the educational status of their students, 20 per cent made home visits. Teachers also confirmed that they uploaded information on child attendance, requirements for the MDM and distribution of MDM in the e-Vidyavahini App.
- *Capacity Building of Teachers:* Nearly 50 per cent of the surveyed teachers reported receiving some form of training during the school closure, including the use of digital devices, ways of handling the COVID-19 phase, and contacting the children during the pandemic. These training programmes were designed to narrow the gap in learning. Teachers also attended training sessions organized for teachers by CInI-Tata Trust.

### 2. Learning during School Closure

- *Learning of Children with Access to Digital Education:* Only about one-fifth of the children reported having access to digital education. CInI, the associate organization of Tata Trust, facilitated digital access to the children. About 10 children shared a tablet to watch educational content and the device was taken back after 2 hours of usage. Among those children who had digital access, 42 per cent in Lohardaga stated that online education was better than face-to-face teaching. In Khunti, nearly half of

the children were indifferent to either of the two modes of education. The parents hardly used smartphones, hence they were unable to share their thoughts about the challenges faced in online education. However, about 5 per cent said that their children's screen time had increased and were exposed to harmful content. Moreover, nearly 65 per cent of the parents reported increased expenditure for phones and Internet packages to facilitate their children's learning. As per the teachers, the major challenges to digital education were students not having gadgets and children facing difficulty in following online classes. More than 20 per cent of the teachers admitted that they neither had digital devices nor skills to conduct online classes.

- **Learning of Children with No Access to Digital Education:** Three-fourths of the children did not have access to digital education. For these children, CInI -Tata Trust facilitated their education through mohalla classes, small group teaching with and without tablets, home visit by volunteers, etc. While 4 per cent of the children admitted to have not studied at all during the closure period, 75 per cent said that they spent less than two hours per day on studies. On the whole, only about one-fifth of the children were able to dedicate substantial time to their studies.
- **Overall Impact on Learning:** Parents were distressed that their children has forgotten the basics that was taught before the pandemic and they were worried as children had been promoted without examinations being conducted. On average, about 30 per cent of the parents complained that the children had forgotten to construct even basic sentences and nearly 35 per cent in Murhu regretted that their children forgot basic numeracy. About 30 per cent stated that their children had forgotten even the basic alphabets. Despite the various online and offline measures adopted for learning, the parental perception was negative on the learning levels of children, as all these measures could not equate with physical attendance in school. More than 35 per cent of the parents whose children attended government schools stated that the children have lost interest in studies and about 49 per cent in Khunti and Lohardaga were worried about the slower and poorer learning pace of the children. Close to 90 per cent of the children stated that their learning experience was better when they physically attended the classes as then they used to get the support of teachers, friends, etc. which is missing in the home atmosphere during school closure.

### III. COVID-19 Response Measures: Interventions of Key Stakeholders

- **Digital Initiatives of the Government:** The government officials and teachers spoke about the usage of digital platforms such as DigiSATH, DIKSHA app, and e-Vidyavahini to impart education during the pandemic period. The government of Jharkhand also collaborated with Pratham and CInI-Tata Trust for the creation of audio-video content. The TV channel 'Hamara Doordarshan Hamara Vidyalaya' was also used as a platform to deliver educational content. Teachers reported using WhatsApp as a mode to deliver educational content. Despite officials stating that education content is being delivered through television channels and web portals, only about one-fifth of the children reported using the same to watch educational programmes, while about 30 per cent used television and phones for entertainment purposes. Moreover, a negligible number of parents reported television being used for educational purposes, while 8 per cent of the parents in Khunti affirmed the usage of WhatsApp for lessons and educational activities.
- **Offline Initiatives of the Government:** The teachers reported undertaking offline measures such as home visits, mohalla classes, educational support through peers, etc. In Lohardaga, 66 per cent of the parents affirmed that their children attended mohalla classes. Only about 12 per cent reported teachers making home visits. Later, when partial schooling was allowed, the teachers started classroom teaching on a rotational basis and almost 45 per cent of the parents affirmed that their children attended those classes.

- *Initiatives of the NGOs:* CInI-Tata Trust had contributed towards the strengthening of existing libraries in government schools and established two types of libraries: mini library and jhola library. They were also engaged in providing training to teachers on online classes. They further encouraged students to write poems, stories, puzzles, riddles, etc. The volunteers of CInI-Tata Trust were engaged in *tola* or *mohalla* group teaching and created digital content in the form of videos and games. They engaged in expanding the digital repository to serve the government and the communities. Though support received from NGOs was not reported by parents in Lohardaga, Khunti, and Murhu, more than 40 per cent of the parents stated receiving learning materials from NGOs and the supply of the tablets was confirmed by about 36 per cent of parents. NGO activities in the form of community learning centres were confirmed by 29 per cent in Khunti.
- *Teacher Initiatives:* Nearly 65 per cent and 35 per cent of the surveyed teachers made regular home visits and telephonic calls to children to bring them back to school. About 25 per cent were also in touch with children through WhatsApp to make the children resume school.
- *Initiatives of Other Stakeholders:* Elected representatives of panchayats contributed to the maintenance of school buildings, boundary walls, making school gates and renovation of kitchen sheds in government schools, which had been dilapidated during the 2 years of school closure. On the other hand, SMCs in the surveyed districts were engaged in the development of kitchen gardens in schools along with CInI-Tata Trust.
- *Readiness Exhibited by Anganwadi Centres Post Re-opening:* In the post-reopening phase, Anganwadi centres had taken various measures to receive children and ensure their entitlements and education by way of preparatory measures, safety measures and set of activities to attract and ensure learning of children. On average, 60-65 per cent of the AWWs stated that they focused on bringing the children back to school, providing cooked meal to them, in addition to focusing on the cleanliness of the children and the Anganwadi centres (AWCs). During the initial period of reopening, the AWCs were regularly sanitized to ensure safety. Though physical distancing norms were maintained, they could not ensure the same among small children beyond a point.
- *Entitlements in Schools:* In the pre-COVID period the surveyed government schools said that they would distribute various entitlements including textbooks, uniforms, MDM, etc. However many of the incentives were abruptly stopped during the closure period, except MDM; it was provided in a dry form during the closure period, and once the school reopened, cooked meals were again resumed. In the pre-COVID-19 period, sanitary pads used to be distributed which had been stopped during school closure; however, it is yet to be resumed.
- *Readiness of School Teachers:* To welcome the children back to school during the initial period of school reopening, the teachers followed preparatory and safety measures; they even greeted the children with balloons. To ensure the children's safety, more than 80 per cent of the teachers said that they engaged in the regular sanitization of schools, distribution of masks, etc. More than 50 per cent of the teachers said that they ensured physical distancing among students and asked the latter to attend classes on a rotational basis.

## C. RECOMMENDATIONS

### I. FOR POLICYMAKERS

- *Social Protection of Marginalized Sections:* To raise people from poverty and relieve them from heavy indebtedness, the policymakers should offer social assistance to the marginalized sections and create additional jobs through MGNREGA.

- *Protection of Children:* The government should relax criteria for benefit packages where needed, increase more of residential facilities for girls, and show zero tolerance for incidents of child abuse, child labour, trafficking, early marriage, etc.
- *Investment in Collection of Real-time data on Child Vulnerabilities:* In the post-pandemic times, cases of dropouts and cases of abuse, trafficking, early marriage, child labour, etc. have been increasing. To address these vulnerabilities of children, the government should invest in the collection of accurate data on child vulnerabilities.
- *Interventions for Children should be Right-based, Inclusive and Sustainable:* The State has to take the prime responsibility to protect and ensure that the Right to Education of children is not threatened or violated, even in emergency situations.
- *Financial Allocation for Education:* Concerns should be raised so that the policymakers can allocate enough funding for education and implementation of the norms and provisions of the Right to Education Act.
- *Strengthen Public Education:* The public education system has to be strengthened in aspects related to teacher recruitment, training of teachers and infrastructure, and priority had to be laid on these aspects by the government.
- *Recognition of ICT as a Tool, Rather than a Replacement for Face-to-face Education:* It is important to highlight with evidence that, in no circumstances, ICT can be a replacement for face-to-face education. It can be used as a complementary tool to bridge the gap.
- *Wider Definition for Learning:* The pandemic revealed the gaps in the learning levels of children. The concept of learning has to relate to the holistic development of children. Though attempts on this front were made in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the Right to Education (RTE) Act, no full-fledged measure has been made and there is a need to revisit the NCF, to widen the perspective of learning, in light of what was revealed during the pandemic.

## II. FOR FUNDING AGENCIES

- *Fund for Studies on Child Vulnerabilities:* There is inadequate real-time data on child dropouts in the post-pandemic times and cases related to child labour, trafficking, child abuse, child marriage, etc. Financial support to address issues related to child vulnerabilities is to be made.
- *Financial Support for COVID-19 Impact Research and Interventions:* Donor organizations can also fund research and interventions that try to examine and address COVID-19-induced vulnerabilities in children's education.

## III. FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY

- *Promoting Community Ownership of Schools:* Active role of the panchayats, school management committees, and the community was visible in states such as Rajasthan and Karnataka, while it was collapsing in most of the other states. Replication of successful models should be adopted in other states.
- *Active Involvement of PRIs and SMCs:* Panchayats and SMCs should be actively involved in school strengthening activities and incentivized for their positive contribution to school development.

## IV. FOR TATA TRUST, FIELD STAFF AND OTHER NGOS

On the various recommendations suggested for policymakers, Tata Trust, field staff, and other NGOs can engage in the implementation of activities, advocacy, capacity building, etc. and make community resources available. In this regard, the specific recommendations that can be formulated in their activities are given in Table 1.

**Table 1: Specific Recommendations for Tata Trust and other NGOs**

	<b>Implementation (Service Provision)/ Awareness Generation</b>	<b>Advocacy</b>	<b>Capacity Building</b>	<b>As a Watchdog in Tracking Educational Interventions</b>
Provision of additional social assistance to the marginalized sections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supply of emergency kits, food supplements, dry rations, etc. during emergency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy on the need for social protection measures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity building of ASHA, Anganwadi workers, SHGs, community, etc. on immediate response measures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey on social protection of vulnerable people</li> </ul>
Collection of real-time data on child vulnerabilities and addressing the concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data collection on child marriage, child trafficking, child labour, child abuse, etc. at the village/block/district/state level wherever possible</li> <li>• Awareness building and learning interventions for girl's education and children with special needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy on the lack of updated data on child vulnerabilities</li> <li>• Advocacy on the exclusion of eligible children from accessing COVID-19 relief in the case of parental death</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Camps and counselling sessions for affected children and mainstreaming them in schools</li> <li>• Vocational training and remedial classes for children to pursue both education and work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whistleblowing in the case of identification of cases of child marriage, trafficking, labour, abuse, etc.</li> <li>• Whistleblowing in the case of misconduct with children in residential schools, camps, houses, schools, etc.</li> <li>• Involving volunteers or community mobilizers to monitor and check child vulnerabilities</li> </ul>
Strengthening the public education system in the aspects of teacher recruitment, training, and infrastructure building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designing the curriculum of training modules of the Teacher Training Institutes</li> <li>• Handholding support to public schools in meeting their requirements post reopening</li> <li>• Resource mobilization for interventions on infrastructure building of government schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy on teacher recruitment and quality of teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training of trainers</li> <li>• Teacher training should include children's lived experiences in pedagogy</li> <li>• Training sessions for teachers to handle children post-COVID-19, psychological support for children, learning enhancement, child development, etc.</li> <li>• Training on teacher preparedness to handle future emergencies/school closure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need assessment study on teacher shortage</li> <li>• Policy brief on the inadequacy of funds to meet COVID-19 challenges</li> </ul>
Recognition of ICT as a tool to cope with any emergency situation, rather than a replacement for face-to-face education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bridging the gap in ICT where possible to facilitate children without digital access</li> <li>• Continuation of community learning activities to ensure face-to-face learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy through policy brief on the advantages and disadvantages of digital education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity building of teachers on using ICT as a tool for education</li> <li>• Counselling sessions with children to deal with mobile addiction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion and dialogue with educational stakeholders on the prudent use of ICT</li> </ul>

Ensuring that the right of children to education is protected and inclusive measures are adopted	<p><b>Early Childhood Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Awareness drive with parents on the need to send their children to school and ensure regular attendance post reopening</li> <li>● Ensure regular supply of nutritional meals and supplements are given to children in Anganwadi centres</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Advocacy when (nutritional meal) right to food and education is not ensured</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Capacity building of Anganwadi workers and teachers on handling children in the post-reopening phase</li> <li>● Handholding support to Anganwadi teachers on their requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Monitoring the functioning of Anganwadi centres</li> </ul>
	<p><b>School Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Awareness drive with parents on the need to send their children to school and ensure regular attendance post reopening</li> <li>● Ensure regular supply of MDM/dry ration to children in schools</li> <li>● Educational interventions for hard-to-reach residential pockets, children of migrant households, drop-out children etc. (who were beyond the reach of government)</li> <li>● Track the transition rate and completion rate of students to higher secondary levels and plan and execute interventions for dropped out or working students</li> <li>● Awareness campaigns with parents on the psychological impact of school closure on children</li> <li>● Lived experiences of children should be incorporated in the interventions of NGOs interventions – e.g. separate learning slots for working children; different learning strategy for children who lost interest in studies; critical dialogue, sessions and discussion with children facing violence or aggressive situation at home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Advocacy on the inadequate funding to meet RTE norms and requirements</li> <li>● Advocacy when MDM/dry ration and education are not ensured</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Capacity building of teachers on handling children in the post-reopening phase</li> <li>● Handholding support to teachers on their requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Monitoring the functioning of schools</li> </ul>
Widening the definition of learning and planning and executing interventions for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Developing toolkits for teachers on holistic learning of children</li> <li>● Learning interventions to address the learning gap of children especially in Classes III-V</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Debate and dialogue with parliamentarians, NGOs, academicians, etc. on the concept of holistic learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teacher training on holistic learning of children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Through policy briefs and field surveys, highlight the narrow definition of learning</li> </ul>

**Note:** Specific recommendations given are indicative. Based on the specialization of Tata Trust, more specific activities can be planned.

