Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Children in Karnataka

A. BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges and crises and brought life to a standstill across the globe. The pandemic particularly had a detrimental effect on children and posed a challenge in fulfilling their rights to life, protection, participation, and education. It is in this context that the Tata Trust entrusted the Council for Social Development (CSD) to conduct a study to examine the impact of the on-going pandemic on the lives and education of rural children in four states of Jharkhand, Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. Based on the insights garnered from the field, the study has recommended actionable plan, both short term and long term, so that the children are able to resume their schooling in the post-pandemic era with confidence and success.

In Karnataka, the primary survey was conducted in mid-February 2022 in Yadgiri block of Yadgiri district and Koppal and Kustagi blocks of Koppal district. Instruments such as survey schedule, focus group discussion (FGD), and open-ended interviews were used to elicit information from 300 parents, 300 children, 30 teachers, 30 *anganwadi* workers, 3 schools, and other stakeholders such as government officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), School Development and Management Committee (SDMC) members, and elected representatives of panchayats. The key findings of the study are discussed here.

B. KEY FINDINGS

I. Effect of Pandemic on the Family and Children

- *Socio-Economic Impact:* In both Koppal and Yadgiri districts, the parents are mostly engaged in agriculture. During the off-season, they migrate to nearby cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, Mumbai, etc. in search of work. The first lockdown resulted in a steep rise in the rate of unemployment. On average, 8 out of 10 parents reported that they had lost their livelihood and many families slipped down the income ladder.

- *Impact on Children:* Adverse situations of the family had a negative impact on the children, and six cases of dropout were reported by the families that had lost their livelihood. The children were forced to drop out of school to contribute to family income and engage in sibling care and household chores. Out of every 10 parents, 6 stated that their children accompanied them to work during school closure and engaged in cotton plucking, weeding, watering the field, etc., while some managed vegetable and fruit vending stalls, grocery stores, among others.

- *Gender Differences:* Differences in gender role were also observed in the kind of work undertaken by boys and girls. More number of boys than girls engaged in running errands and income-generating activities, while the latter were confined to cooking, cleaning and washing.

- *Health and Nutrition of Children:* Due to the disturbance in the everyday routine, the eating pattern of children was affected too and they either over-ate or under-ate. Under-eating was seen in the Yadgiri district and higher instances of overeating were reported in Kustagi. In the initial period of the lockdown, the government did not emphasize on nutritional supplements for children. This was, however, rectified at a later stage. Anganwadi workers (AWW) reported that they distributed dry ration, eggs, and bananas on a regular basis to children below 6 years during the entire closure period. However, only 7 per cent of the parents said that they had received the same. Schools too provided

midday meals (MDM) in the form of a dry ration during the closure period. Close to three-fourths of the parents acknowledged receiving take-home ration (THR) on a regular basis.

- *Wellbeing of Children:* In Yadgiri block 70 per cent of the parents reported increased stress level and anxiety among their children while in Koppal block 57 per cent of the parents were worried that their children's physical activities had greatly reduced. In Koppal block, 48 per cent of the parents complained their children's social interaction had been affected. Despite such a negative impact on the children's well-being, about 10 per cent of the parents affirmed that the school closure period had improved their bonding with their children.

- *Protection of Children:* Child protection officers in Yadgiri and Koppal districts stated that in the case of a COVID-19 death of a single parent or both parents, financial support was provided to the children. However, the benefit-giving packages have rigid criteria, which restrict the children from availing the same. During FGD, the parents highlighted that in the post-pandemic times child marriage cases have increased, as parents are unable to ensure the safety of girls at home. The girls were reported to be safe in schools, when it was functioning regularly. Cases of unwanted pregnancy were also reported by the child protection officials, during the closure period.

II. Effect of Pandemic on the Education of Children

1. Education during School Closure

- *Effect of School Closure:* School were closed for almost 18 months, from March 2020 to September 2021. It severely impacted the children's education, affecting their discipline, everyday routine, and education. More than three-fourths of the parents said that the schools' closure because of the pandemic affected their children's education. Factors such as distraction, chores, and lack of monitoring mechanism at home impacted the children's education.

- *Disruption in School Infrastructure:* There was disruption of school infrastructure, due to closure for a long period of time. About 18 per cent of the parents expressed concerns about the dilapidated condition of school toilets. About 7 per cent and 6 per cent reported the poor condition of classrooms and broken boundary walls of schools.

- *Teacher Shortage:* The surveyed schools already suffered teacher shortage, which impacted the learning of children and the pandemic situation worsened it. In order to deal with this issue, contractual teachers in some cases were appointed and paid either by the SDMCs or by the NGOs The private schools too, faced issue of teacher shortage, as many teachers were removed from job, as the management was unable to pay their salaries during closure period.

- *Teacher Activities during School Closure:* More than half of the teachers were engaged in COVID-19 vaccination drives and had targets to meet. More than 80 per cent of the teachers reported sharing educational content, YouTube links and activities with children through WhatsApp. To find out about the educational status of their students, 30 per cent made home visits. Another 10 per cent said that they were unable to engage in teaching activities during the school closure period, as they were neither able to keep a track of their school children nor get their mobile numbers.

- *Capacity Building of Teachers:* None of the teachers reported receiving any kind of training during the school closure period on how to handle the COVID-19 phase and contact the children during the pandemic. However, some teachers, on their own initiative, attended training sessions offered in the National Initiative for School Head Teachers' Holistic Advancement (NISHTHA) portal. Only at a later stage were the teachers given instructions on how to organize Vidhyagama classes, but no training on how to go about it.

2. Learning during School Closure

- *Learning of Children with Access to Digital Education:* Only about one-third of the children had access to digital education. Among these, 70 per cent reported that online learning experience was worse. The major challenge in online education was the increased screen time and exposure of children to inappropriate content, as affirmed by 90 per cent of the parents in Yadgiri. In Koppal, 50 per cent of the teachers admitted that they lack digital skills to conduct online classes. Other teachers, who had digital skills, used the online platform to get themselves trained but felt it to be an unviable platform to teach children.

- *Learning of Children with no Access to Digital Education:* Three-fourth of the children did not have access to digital education and teachers and NGOs opted for Vidhyagama classes, community learning centres, and tuition centres to educate these children. These were run by Tata Trust volunteers in two shifts and were of 2 hours duration, both in the morning and in the evening. While 3 per cent of the children admitted to not studying at all during the closure period, 70 per cent said they spent less than two hours per day on studies. On the whole, only about one-third of the children could give substantial time to studies.

- *Overall Impact on Learning:* Parents were unhappy that their children had forgotten the basics in foundational literacy. On average, about 16 per cent of the parents complained that the children were unable to construct even basic sentences. In Kustagi, 23 per cent of the parents complained that their children forgot basic calculations. In contrast, parents in Koppal and Yadgiri gave a positive response to their children's learning ability. This can be correlated with the learning initiatives implemented by Tata Trust, which include various measures such as story-telling, reading sessions, etc. Nearly half of the parents of government school children said that their children had lost interest in studies and about 46 per cent in Yadgiri were worried about the reduced learning pace of the children. On the other hand, more than 60 per cent of the children stated that their learning experience was better when the schools were open, as they used to get support of teachers, friends, etc. which they were unable to get at home.

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

- *Digital Initiatives of the Government:* Karnataka did not actively promote technology-enabled education, on a massive scale, as masses lacked digital devices. However, digital platforms such as NISHTHA, Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DISKHA), Makkala Vani YouTube Channel, DD Chandana channel, etc. were used by the teachers to deliver education content. Teachers used WhatsApp to share lessons, contents, activities and YouTube links to children. In terms of outcome, 80 per cent of the parents said that the children watched educational programmes on television, while 60 per cent reported that the children used televisions and phones for entertainment too. Though web portals were offered as solutions, only 16 per cent of the parents confirmed the usage of the same. Only about 20 per cent of the parents stated that their children used WhatsApp for lessons and activities.

- *Offline Initiatives of the Government:* During school closure, teachers undertook offline measures such as home visit, open-air classes through Vidyagama, and classroom teaching on a rotational basis, to impart education. One-third of the surveyed parents affirmed that their children attended the Vidyagama classes. One in five parents in Kustagi confirmed that teachers made home visits. Later, when partial schooling was allowed, the teachers started classroom teaching on a rotational basis and more than 50 per cent of the parents affirmed that their children attended those classes.

- *Initiatives of the NGOs:* Kallike-Tata Trust established community learning centres (CLCs) in different parts of Yadgiri and Koppal districts and organized tuition centres with the help of local volunteers. In

the post-reopening phase, Tata Trust animators initiated bridge course for Classes I-III and Classes IV-V in the government schools. In addition, books were provided to government school libraries with the aim to strengthen them. Tata Trust offered support to SDMCs for reformation. Workbooks and activity cards were also developed for English, Mathematics, and Kannada. Workshops were conducted for children on how to deal with emotional disturbances and psychological issues. Other NGOs provided furniture to government schools and appointed temporary teaching staff. More than 50 per cent of the parents said they had received support from the NGOs in the form of community centres, wherein children learnt something during the school closure period.

- *Teacher Initiatives:* More than 50 per cent of the teachers made home visits and telephonic calls to bring back the children to schools when they reopened and ensure their attendance. One-third of the teachers used WhatsApp to get in touch with children and make them resume school.

- *Initiatives of Other Stakeholders:* Elected representatives of panchayats supplied smartphones and refurbished laptops to the poorest families to facilitate online education during school closure. They also created panchayat libraries and invited children to spend 2-3 hours there. The representatives also contributed towards arrangement for water supply, installation of smart boards, planting of trees in school premises and decoration of walls with paintings to attract children, maintenance of boundary walls, toilets, etc. which had dilapidated in the two years of closure. They also collected donations from the community to manage school development activities. In the post-reopening phase, SDMCs played a key role in bringing the children back to schools, who otherwise developed inhibition to return after a long break. The SDMCs also mobilized Rs 1000 per family for school development activities in the post-reopening phase.

- *Readiness Exhibited by Anganwadi Centres and Schools Post Re-opening:* In the post reopening phase, to receive children and ensure their entitlements and education, the anganwadi centres and schools took various preparatory and safety measures and set of activities. On average, 60 per cent of the AWWs said that they paid attention on bringing the children back to school, providing cooked meals to them, in addition to focusing on the cleanliness of the children and the anganwadi centres (AWCs).

- *Entitlements in Schools:* Though various entitlement such as distribution of textbooks, uniforms, MDM, etc. were provided by the surveyed government schools in the pre-COVID-19 period, many of these incentives were abruptly stopped in the closure period, except MDM. The MDM was provided in dry form during the closure period, and after the schools reopened, cooked meals were again served to the students. In Yadgiri and Koppal, schools used to distribute sanitary pads in the pre-COVID period; however, it is yet to be resumed after the schools resumed classes.

- *Readiness of School Teachers:* Teachers ensured that preparatory and safety measures were followed during the initial period of school reopening to welcome back the children. To ensure children safety, almost all the teachers said that they regularly engaged in school sanitization programme, mask distributions, etc. In the initial days, to ensure physical distancing, children were made to attend the school on a rotational basis.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

I. FOR POLICYMAKERS

- *Social Protection of Marginalised Sections:* Policymakers should be made aware about concerns related to the need to offer social assistance to the marginalized sections and create additional jobs through MGNREGA and relieve the people from the clutches of poverty and high indebtedness.

- *Protection of Children:* The government should relax criteria for benefit packages where needed, increase residential facilities for girls, and have 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, abuse, trafficking, early marriage, child labour, etc. have increased. To address these vulnerabilities, the government should invest in collecting accurate data on these issues.
- *Interventions for Children should be Right-based, Inclusive, and Sustainable:* The state has to take primary 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:* Policymakers have to be made aware of the inadequate funding in education and for implementation of norms and provisions of Right to Education.
- *Strengthen Public Education:* Requirements that can strengthen the public education system on aspects related to teacher recruitment, training of teachers, and infrastructure have to be highlighted and the government be made to prioritize these aspects.
- *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, can information and communications technology be a replacement for physical classroom education. However, it can be used as a 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 holistic development of children. Though attempts on this front were made in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the Right to Education Act, no full-fledged measures have been made. The NCF needs to be revisited, perspective of learning widened, in light of the issues that emerged during the pandemic.

II. FOR FUNDING AGENCIES

- *Fund for studies on Child Vulnerabilities:* There is inadequacy of real-time data on dropout of children in the post-pandemic period and cases related to child labour, trafficking, child abuse, child marriage, etc. Financial support has to be given to address issues related to child vulnerabilities.
- *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 on education of children.

III. FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY

- *Promoting Community Ownership of Schools:* In Rajasthan and Karnataka, the panchayats, school management committees, and the community played active role while in other states these organizations performed dismally. The other states should replicate these successful models of the two states.
- *Active Involvement of PRIs and SMCs:* Panchayats and SMCs should be actively involved in school strengthening activities and incentivized for their positive contribution towards school development.

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

On the various recommendations highlighted 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 tabulated here.

Table 1: Specific Recommendations for Tata Trust and other NGOs				
	Implementation (Service Provision)/ Awareness Generation	**Advocacy**	**Capacity Building**	**As a Watchdog in Tracking Educational Interventions**
Provision of additional social assistance to the marginalized sections	• Supply of emergency kits, food supplements, dry ration, etc. during emergency	• Advocacy on the need for social protection measures	• Capacity building of ASHA, anganwadi workers, SHGs, community, etc. on immediate response measures	• Survey on social protection of vulnerable people
Collection of real-time data on child vulnerabilities and addressing the concerns	• Data collection on child marriage, child trafficking, child labour, child abuse, etc. at the village/block/district/state level wherever possible • Awareness building and learning interventions for girl's education and children with special needs	• Advocacy on the lack of updated data on child vulnerabilities • Advocacy on the exclusion of eligible children from accessing COVID-19 relief in case of parental death	• Camps and counselling sessions for affected children and mainstreaming them in schools • Vocational training and remedial classes for children to pursue both education and work	• Whistleblowing in case of identification of cases of child marriage, trafficking, labour, abuse, etc. • Whistleblowing in case of misconduct with children in residential schools, camps, house, schools, etc. • Involving volunteers or community mobilizers to monitor and check child vulnerabilities
Strengthening public education system on aspects of teacher recruitment, training, and infrastructure building	• Designing the curriculum of training modules of the teacher training institutes • Handholding public schools on meeting their requirements post reopening • Resource mobilization for interventions on infrastructure building of government schools	• Advocacy on teacher recruitment and quality of teachers	• Training of trainers • Teacher training should include children's lived experiences in pedagogy • Training sessions for teachers on handling children post-Covid-19 pandemic, psychological support for children, learning enhancement, child development etc. • Training on teacher preparedness to handling future emergencies/school closure	• Assessment study on teacher shortage • Policy brief on inadequacy of fund to meet COVID-19 challenges
Recognition of ICT as a tool to cope up with any emergency situation, rather than as a replacement for face-to-face education	• Bridging the gap in ICT where possible to facilitate children without digital access • Continuation of community learning activities to ensure face-to-face learning	• Advocacy through policy brief on the advantages and disadvantages of digital education	• Capacity building of teacher on using ICT as a tool for education • Counselling sessions with children to deal with mobile addiction	• Discussion and dialogue with educational stakeholders on the prudent use of ICT

Ensuring that right of children to education is protected and inclusive measures are adopted	**Early Childhood Education** • Awareness drive with parents on the need to send their children to school and ensure regular attendance post reopening • Ensure regular supply of nutritional meal and supplements to children in anganwadi centres	• Advocacy when (nutritional meal) right to food and education are not ensured	• Capacity building of anganwadi workers and teachers on handling children in the post reopening phase • Handholding support to anganwadi teachers on their requirements	• Monitoring the functioning of anganwadi centres
	School Education • Awareness drive with parents on the need to send their children to school and ensure regular attendance post reopening • Ensure regular supply of MDM/dry ration to children in schools • Educational interventions for hard to reach residential pockets, children of migrant households, children who have dropped out, etc. (who were beyond the reach of government) • Track the transition rate and completion rate of students till higher secondary levels and plan and execute interventions for dropped out or working students • Awareness campaigns with parents on the psychological impact of school closure on children • 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	• Advocacy on the inadequate funding to meet RTE norms and requirements • Advocacy when MDM/dry ration and education are not ensured	• Capacity building of teachers on handling children in the post reopening phase • Handholding support to teachers on their requirements	• Monitoring the functioning of schools
Widening the definition of learning and planning and executing interventions for learning	• Developing toolkits for teachers on holistic learning of children • Learning interventions to address the learning gap of children especially in Classes III-V	• Debate and dialogue with parliamentarians, NGOs, academicians, etc. on the concept of holistic learning	• Teacher training on holistic learning of children	• Through policy briefs and field survey, highlight the narrow definition on learning

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