

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

### A. BACKGROUND

The outbreak of COVID-19 has led to unprecedented challenges and crises, which brought life to a standstill across the globe. The impact of the pandemic on children has been quite severe. During the pandemic, it became particularly difficult to fulfil the rights of children to life, protection, participation, and education. It is in this context that Tata Trust entrusted the Council for Social Development (CSD) to conduct a study and examine the impact of the on-going pandemic on the lives and education of rural children in the four states of Jharkhand, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Based on the insights garnered from the field, the study has made actionable recommendations that include short-term and long-term solutions so that children are able to resume their schooling in the post-pandemic era with confidence and success.

The primary survey in Rajasthan was conducted in March 2022 and covered the Hindaun block of Karauli district and the Abu road and Pindwara blocks of the Sirohi district. Instruments such as survey schedule, focus group discussion (FGD), and open-ended interviews were used to garner 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 Management Committee (SMC) 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:** The parents were engaged in agriculture, managing livestock, and majorly working as daily wage labourers. The livelihood of the household got severely affected during the initial COVID-19-induced lockdown and 9 in 10 parents mentioned losing their livelihood. The highly impacted lot were the salaried and casual labourers. Families also slipped down the income ladder and the share of households having an annual income of 'less than Rs 1 lakh' increased to 53 per cent in March 2022 from 44.3 per cent in the pre-COVID-19 situation.
- **Impact on Children:** Adverse situations in the family negatively affected the children, and there were 7 cases of dropouts in families that had lost their livelihood. Six of the children had dropped out to contribute to family income, and to engage in sibling care and household chores. Some of the children (14 per cent) reported they were engaged in income-generating activities. About one-fourth of the parents in Abu road stated that their children accompanied them to work during school closure and were engaged in agricultural activities, cattle rearing, etc.
- **Gender Differences:** Gender played a role in the kind of activities carried out by the boys and the girls. About 60 per cent of the boys and 45 per cent of girls were engaged in household chores; the boys ran errands and the girls were engaged in washing utensils and clothes, cleaning the house, etc.
- **Health and Nutrition of Children:** More than 15 per cent of the parents reported that their children over-ate during this period while 5 per cent said that their children under-ate during this period. During the initial period of the lockdown, nutritional supplements for children were neglected, but later mid-day meals (MDM) were provided to them in the form of dry rations during the entire school closure period. Anganwadi workers (AWW) said that they gave supplementary nutrition to children

below 6 years. However, only 10 per cent of the parents reported receiving the same. Similarly, schools also provided MDM in the form of dry ration during the closure period and about 85 per cent of the parents stated that they received take-home ration (THR) regularly. Even during the closure period, major activities of AWWs such as immunization, providing deworming tablets, and measurement of height and weight of children functioned continuously.

- *Wellbeing of Children:* After the schools had closed, around one-third of the parents said social interaction among the children had reduced. Nearly half of the parents reported that their children suffered from anxiety and stress during the school closure. Despite such a negative impact on the well-being, nearly half of the parents affirmed that the school closure period had brought better bonding between the parents and the children.
- *Protection of Children:* About 5 per cent of the children in Hindaun and Abu road reported that their friends and other children in known circle had been married during the school closure period. During FGD, parents stated that the case of child marriage has increased in their region, and a panchayat president cited poverty as the major reason behind child marriages. In the Karauli district, the issue of domestic violence was reported as a major challenge that affected children, which had exacerbated during the pandemic times. The safety of girls was also reported as a major threat. In Abu road, cases of rape, child marriage, girl trafficking, and smuggling are quite common, but people were not vocal about these problems.

## 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 caused a severe impact on children's education, affecting their discipline and everyday routine. About 90 per cent of the parents affirmed that their child's education got affected because of school closure.
- *Disruption in School Infrastructure:* About 10 per cent of the parents expressed concerns about the dilapidated condition of school infrastructure in the post-pandemic phase, including toilets without water facilities, and poor condition of the school building and classrooms. The dilapidated condition of school infrastructure was highly reported on Abu road (29 per cent).
- *Access:* Nearly 98 per cent had access to government schools. More than 30 per cent of children mentioned that they had shifted their school after the pandemic. Out of these children, nearly 60 per cent said they were unable to pay the private school fees, whereas a few mentioned migrating to another locality.
- *Teacher Shortage:* In the surveyed government schools, head teachers reported a shortage of teachers. To deal with the issue of teacher shortage, contractual teachers were appointed.
- *Teacher Activities during School Closure:* During school closure, teachers were engaged in both non-academic and academic activities. About 30 per cent of the teachers were engaged in COVID-19 vaccination drives and activities related to the distribution of rations. About 30 per cent of the teachers reported engaging with their students online through WhatsApp, sharing YouTube links, and making telephonic calls so that the children continued learning at home. Nearly 35 per cent of the teachers also made home visits to find out about the educational status of their students. However, about 20 per cent in Hindaun said that they could not initiate any teaching activities during the school closure period.
- *Capacity Building of Teachers:* Nearly one-third of the surveyed teachers reported receiving some kind of training during the school closure period. These included the use of digital devices, ways of handling the COVID-19 phase and contacting the children during the pandemic so that the gap in learning could be reduced.

## 2. Learning during School Closure

- **Learning of Children with Access to Digital Education:** Nearly, half of the children reported having access to digital education and this proportion was high in Abu road (61 per cent). Children who had digital access gave mixed responses. About 10 per cent stated that online education was better than face-to-face teaching, 40 per cent were indifferent between the two different modes of learning, and around 20 per cent reported that the experience was worse than face-to-face teaching. The major challenge in online education was that the children got exposed to inappropriate content, as affirmed by 30 per cent of the parents in Abu road and Pindwara. Among parents, 8 out of 10 said their expenses had increased because of digital devices, whereas 7 out of 10 parents reported a lack of digital skills to handle online classes as the major challenge. Teachers expressed that a major challenge was the lack of access to digital devices and digital skills both among teachers and children.
- **Learning of Children with No Access to Digital Education:** Nearly half of the children did not have access to digital education. These children's education was facilitated by the teachers, community learning centres, mohalla classes, etc. While 1 per cent of the children admitted to not studying at all during the closure period, 65 per cent spent less than two hours per day on studies. On the other hand, less than one-third of the children could give substantial time to studies.
- **Overall Impact on Learning:** On average, about 37 per cent of the parents complained that children had forgotten to construct even basic sentences and 50 per cent in Hindaun witnessed that their children's reading ability had decreased. For numeracy skills, this was 30 per cent. Nearly 60 per cent in Hindaun and Abu Road expressed that their children had even forgotten the basic alphabet. 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 to the regular schooling experience of children. Nearly one-third of the parents who sent their children to government schools stated that their children had lost interest in studies and more than 40 per cent in Hindaun and Pindwara were worried about the reduced learning pace of children. About 95 per cent of the children stated that their learning experience was better when the schools were open, as they used to get the support of teachers, friends, etc. which was missing in the home atmosphere.

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

- **Digital Initiatives of the Government:** In Rajasthan, through the Social Media Interface for Learning Engagement (SMILE) project, the state government tried to fill the learning gap by delivering online content and worksheet for the government school students. Education was also imparted through radio (Shikshavani) and television (Shiksha darshan). In addition, e-Kaksha, a YouTube channel, was also created to deliver educational content. Fifteen days of online training was also provided to teachers through DIKSHA. Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States (STARS) programme was also launched to improve the assessment system in schools. Though the promotion of digital solutions was widely reported by government officials, at the ground level, only a few children affirmed using the same. For instance, only 11 per cent reported using digital platforms for watching educational programmes. On the other hand, 75 per cent in Hindaun stated that they watched television for entertainment purposes. About 25 per cent of the children used smartphones for entertainment. None of the parents said that their children watched television for educational purposes. In Pindwara, usage of online platforms was reported by 51 per cent of the parents while 39 per cent said that their children used WhatsApp to note down lessons and activities.
- **Offline Initiatives of the Government:** Offline measures such as home visits by teachers, open-air classes, mobile school, Camp Vidya (a learning initiative that engages girls to teach activity-based learning to children), distribution of worksheets, etc. were undertaken by the Rajasthan government.

About 30 per cent of the parents in Hindaun confirmed that their children had attended open-air classes. Home visit by teachers was confirmed by a high proportion of parents in Pindwara (70 per cent). Classroom teaching that was started at a later stage of the school closure period was highly preferred and 55 per cent of the parents in Hindaun stated that their children attended such classes.

- **Initiatives of the NGOs:** Centre for Micro Finance (CMF), an associate organization of Tata Trust, was engaged in creating awareness among the community on the importance of learning continuation and the use of online classes, WhatsApp content, and broadcast of television programmes, child protection, ill-effects of early marriage, etc. It also distributed tablets and appointed volunteers to teach children in small groups. Books were made available at the doorstep of children through mobile libraries. The School Facilitators (SF) or the *Sikhshan Mitras* worked with the children, teachers, and SMC of government schools and the local community. Nearly, 30 per cent of the parents in Abu road and Pindwara stated that NGOs were engaged in promoting the learning of children at the village level and very few reported receiving learning material from NGOs.
- **Teacher Initiatives:** Nearly three-fourths of the teachers reported making home visits to bring back children to school and ensure their attendance. About 10 per cent in Pindwara was in touch with children through WhatsApp to bring back children to school. While 60 per cent in Abu road reported making telephonic calls to children, another 10 per cent in Hindaun admitted to having taken no measures to enhance learning during the school closure period.
- **Initiatives of Other Stakeholders:** Elected representatives of panchayats contributed towards arranging water supply, decorating walls with paintings to attract children and maintaining boundary walls, toilets, etc. which had been dilapidated during the two years of school closure.
- **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 a set of activities to attract and ensure learning of children. On average, 87 per cent of the AWWs said they ensured the cleanliness of the Anganwadi centres (AWCs). Regular sanitization of the AWCs was undertaken in the initial period of reopening to ensure safety. More than 80 per cent of the parents reported ensuring physical distancing norms. Less than half of the AWWs reported talking to children to make them feel comfortable and about one-third of the parents reported monitoring the health and behaviour of children.
- **Entitlements in Schools:** Though various entitlement such as distribution of textbooks, uniforms, MDM, etc. was provided by the surveyed government schools in the pre-COVID-19 period, except for MDM many of these incentives were abruptly stopped during the closure period. The MDM was provided in a dry form during the closure period, and in the post-reopening period, cooked meals were served. Distribution of sanitary pads in the pre-COVID-19 period was reported by schools; however, it is yet to be resumed. Teachers also reported that they were engaged in offering remedial classes and community classes, during both the closure and the reopening phase.
- **Readiness of School Teachers:** Preparatory and safety measures were undertaken by teachers in the initial period of school reopening to welcome the children back to school. To ensure the safety of children, almost all the teachers reported engaging in the regular sanitization of schools, distribution of masks, etc. In the initial period, to ensure physical distancing, children were asked to attend school on a rotational basis.

## C. RECOMMENDATIONS

### I. FOR POLICYMAKERS

- **Social Protection of Marginalized Sections:** Policymakers have to be made aware of the need to offer social assistance to the marginalized sections and create additional jobs through MGNREGA so that people get relief from the clutches of poverty and high indebtedness.

- *Protection of Children:* The government should relax criteria for benefit packages where needed, increase more 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, abuse, trafficking, early marriage, child labour, etc. have increased. To address these vulnerabilities of children, the government should invest in a 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 of protecting the Right to Education of Children and ensuring it is not threatened or violated even in an emergency situation.
- *Financial Allocation for Education:* Concerns have to be raised to the policymakers on low funding for education and implementation of the norms and provisions of the Right to Education Act.
- *Strengthen Public Education:* The public education system should be strengthened and aspects related to teacher recruitment, training of teachers and infrastructure, etc. have to be focused upon. The government has to lay priority on 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, ICT can be a replacement for face-to-face education; it can be used only 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 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

- *Funds for Studies on Child Vulnerabilities:* The real-time data on the dropout of children in the post-pandemic times and cases related to child labour, trafficking, child abuse, child marriage, etc. are inadequate. Financial support has to be made 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 in the education of children.

## III. FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY

- *Promoting Community Ownership of Schools:* In states such as Rajasthan and Karnataka, it was evident that the panchayats, school management committees and the community played an active role, 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 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 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 or state level where 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 relief in 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 case of identification of cases of child marriage, trafficking, labour, abuse, etc.</li> <li>Whistleblowing in case of misconduct with children in residential schools, camps, houses, schools, etc.</li> <li>Involving volunteers or community mobilisers 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 on: handling children post Covid, 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 challenges</li> </ul>
Recognition of ICT as a tool to cope with any emergency, 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 right of children to education is	<p><b>Early Childhood Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awareness drive with parents on the need to send</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advocacy when (nutritional meal) right to food and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Capacity building of Anganwadi workers and teachers on handling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring the functioning of Anganwadi Centres</li> </ul>

protected & inclusive measures are adopted	<p>their children to school and ensure regular attendance post reopening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ensure regular supply of nutritional meals and supplements to children in Anganwadi centres</li> </ul>	education is not ensured	<p>children in the post-reopening phase</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Handholding support to Anganwadi teachers on their requirements</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 the 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.

