

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Children in Uttar Pradesh

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 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 information generated from the field, the Council for Social Development made 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 Uttar Pradesh, the primary survey was conducted in the Phakarpur and Risia blocks of Bahraich district and Gilaula block of Shravasti district between January and February 2022. 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, 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:** Most of the parents are engaged in agriculture while some manage small businesses such as flour mills, grocery stores, etc. Many of the parents have migrated to Pune, Mumbai, etc. because of work and are employed in factories, tailoring units, etc. During the lockdown period, 8 out of 10 parents mentioned losing their livelihood and nearly one-fifth of the households became unemployed. By February-March 2022, they had a slow economic recovery.
- **Impact on Children:** The children were affected negatively because of the adverse situations of their families. At least one case of dropout was reported by the families who had lost their livelihood during the pandemic. During the lockdown, these school-going children reported having engaged in income-generating activities (25 per cent), sibling care and cooking (45 per cent), and household chores (78 per cent). Nearly one-fifth of the parents said that their children had accompanied them to work when the schools were closed and engaged in cattle rearing, watering the field, etc.
- **Gender Differences:** Difference in gender roles was noted in the kind of work undertaken by boys and girls and more boys (38 per cent) than girls (10 per cent) were engaged in income-generating activities. The boys ran errands and engaged in income-generating activities, while the girls were confined to domestic work.
- **Health and Nutrition of Children:** About 16 per cent of the parents in Phakarpur and 14 per cent in Gilaula and Risia said that their children under-ate and over-ate respectively, during the school closure period. Though Anganwadi workers (AWWs) said that the Anganwadis supplied nutritional supplements to young children, only 2.5 per cent of the parents reported receiving the same. Schools

too provided midday meals (MDM) in the form of dry ration during the closure period and close to 57 per cent of the parents stated that they received take-home ration (THR) regularly.

- *Wellbeing of Children:* Increased stress level and anxiety among children was reported by 35 per cent of the parents, and one-fifth of them said that their children did not get enough physical activity. In Risia, 37 per cent of the parents reported that their children's social interaction had decreased while 20 per cent of the parents said that their children had disturbed sleeping patterns. Despite such a negative impact on the children's wellbeing, more than 40 per cent of the parents affirmed that during the school closure, they had better bonding and quality time with their children.

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, almost 18 months, had caused a severe impact on the children's education, affecting their discipline, everyday routine, and education. More than 50 per cent of the parents believed that their children's education got affected because of school closure.
- *Disruption in School Infrastructure:* About 20 per cent of the parents expressed concerns about the dilapidated condition of school infrastructure in the post-pandemic phase. These included toilets without water facilities and poor condition of the school building and classrooms.
- *Teacher Shortage:* In the surveyed government schools, the head teachers cited the shortage of teachers as a major problem. *Anu deshaks* (contractual teachers) were appointed to deal with the issue of teacher shortage.
- *Teacher Activities during School Closure:* About 40 per cent of the teachers in Risia were engaged in COVID-19 vaccination drives, 60 per cent in Gilaula in activities related to ration distribution and 70 per cent of the teachers in Phakarpur in ensuring physical distancing during the peak pandemic period. Nearly, 50 per cent of the teachers said that they used WhatsApp to share educational content, YouTube links, and activities with the children. The teachers (23 per cent) made home visits to find out about the educational status of their students. In Risia, less than one-third reported that teaching was not possible at all during the closure period.
- *Capacity Building of Teachers:* More than 90 per cent of the surveyed teachers said that they were given some kind of training during the school closure, including on using digital devices, handling the COVID-19 phase, and contacting the children during the pandemic, so that the gap in learning could be minimized.

2. Learning during School Closure

- *Learning of Children with Access to Digital Education:* Only about 14 per cent of the children reported that they had access to digital education. Among those who said they had digital access, 50 per cent felt that online education was better than face-to-face teaching. In Gilaula nearly 60 per cent said that there was no difference between the two modes of teaching while 25 per cent observed that online education was worse than face-to-face teaching. The parents had hardly used smartphones and hence were not able to share about the challenges in online education. Even then about 11 per cent said that their children had increased screen time and 5 per cent believed that their children were exposed to harmful content. Nearly 40 per cent of the parents complained about the increased expenditure on phones and the Internet, which they had bought to facilitate the learning of their children. Teachers reported that they and the students not having the gadgets was the major challenge of digital

education. About 30 per cent of the teachers admitted that they lacked both digital devices and skills to conduct online classes.

- **Learning of Children with No Access to Digital Education:** More than 90 per cent of the children did not have access to digital education. For these children, TCL-Tata Trust facilitated *mohalla* classes and a community learning centre. While 25 per cent of the children said that they did not study at all during the closure period, nearly 65 per cent admitted to studying for less than two hours per day. On the whole, only about 9 per cent of the children could devote substantial time to their studies.
- **Overall Impact on Learning:** Parents regretted that their children forgot the basics that were taught before the pandemic. On average, about 50 per cent of the parents observed that the children had forgotten to construct even the basic sentences and calculations. About 45 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 to the conventional schooling experience of children. Nearly one-fourth of the parents, who had enrolled their children to government schools, stated that their children have lost interest in studies and more than 40 per cent were worried about the decreased learning pace of children. About 90 per cent of the children stated that their learning experience was better when the schools were open, as they were supported by teachers, friends, etc.

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

- **Digital Initiatives of the Government:** In Uttar Pradesh, government officials reported the wide use of Prerna Apps, e-Pathshala and DIKSHA App, and accessing of quick response (QR) codes for lessons and activities. Teachers said that they used WhatsApp to share educational content and YouTube links with children. Though the Uttar Pradesh government promoted digital initiatives to make education available to children at the doorstep, at the ground level the narrative was very different. In Gilaula block only 2 per cent of the children said they used digital devices for educational purposes against 23 per cent in Risia. On the other hand, 20-40 per cent of them used smartphones and televisions for entertainment. Across all the three blocks of Uttar Pradesh hardly any of the parents used online learning platforms, televisions and WhatsApp. The proportion was as low as 2-3 per cent in both Bahraich and Shravasti districts.
- **Offline Initiatives of the Government:** To make education available at their doorstep, offline measures such as home visits by teachers, *mohalla* classes, distribution of worksheets, etc. were undertaken for the benefit of the children. Only 22 per cent of the parents in Phakarpur reported that their children attended the *Mohalla* classes. Only 19 per cent in Phakarpur and 13 per cent in Risia stated that teachers made home visits. There was negligible involvement of volunteers for doorstep delivery of education. In contrast, when regular classroom teaching resumed at a later stage, the children accessed these classes in large numbers. The same was corroborated by 76 per cent of the parents in Risia and 68 per cent in Phakarpur.
- **Initiatives of the NGOs:** TCL-Tata Trust undertook various interventions such as Information and Communications Technology (ICT) education in government schools, and community learning centres in villages, which took care of basic reading, writing, basic numeracy and literacy. Other NGOs such as Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) offered technical support to teachers to enhance their learning and centres were established to impact education for children with the help of local volunteers. Ahmed Seva Sansthan took care of maintenance and repair of government school buildings, distribution of sanitary pads to girls, tracking of out-of-school and disabled children, and distribution of worksheets. About 25 per cent of the parents said that they received study materials from the NGOs and learned through community centres. A little more than 20 per cent of parents mentioned the promotion of

learning at the village level by NGOs, whereas 15 per cent confirmed that NGOs made digital devices available to children.

- *Teacher Initiatives:* Nearly 36 per cent of the surveyed teachers made regular home visits and telephonic calls to children to bring them back to school. About 20 per cent were also in touch with children through WhatsApp to bring them back to school. However, a major proportion of 30 per cent reported taking no measures to reach children during the closure period.
- *Initiatives of Other Stakeholders:* Elected representatives of panchayats contributed towards sanitization of the villages and schools and maintenance of school buildings, boundary walls, etc. which had been dilapidated in the two years of closure. On the other hand, SMCs were not found to be that active in Uttar Pradesh and were hardly engaged in school development activities.
- *Readiness exhibited by Anganwadi centres Post-Re-opening:* In the post-reopening phase, Anganwadi centres took 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, 80 per cent of the AWWs said that they made efforts to bring the children back to school, 53 per cent focused on providing a cooked meal to children, and more than 60 per cent focused on the cleanliness of the children and the Anganwadi centres (AWCs). The AWCs were regularly sanitized in the initial period of reopening to ensure safety and more than 60 per cent tried to ensure physical distancing. More than 60 per cent of the AWWs reported that they monitored the health and behaviour of children and about 55 per cent said that they adopted the play way method of teaching to attract young children.
- *Entitlements in Schools:* In the pre-COVID-19 period the surveyed government schools distributed textbooks, uniforms, MDM, etc., many of these incentives were abruptly stopped during the closure period, except for MDM and issue of textbooks. MDM was provided in a dry form during the closure period, and cooked meals were resumed in the post-reopening period. A cash transfer of INR 1,100 was done to the children's account for buying uniforms. In the pre-COVID-19 period, schools distributed sanitary pads but it had not resumed after the schools had reopened.
- *Readiness of School Teachers:* Teachers undertook various preparatory and safety measures during the initial period of school reopening to welcome the children back to school. To ensure children's safety, more than 40 per cent of the teachers reported that they engaged in regular school sanitization, mask distribution, etc. About 30 per cent of the teachers in Risia reported ensuring physical distancing. Moreover in the initial period, to ensure physical distancing, children were asked to come to school on a rotational basis. Apart from that, teachers were also engaged in school maintenance activities and took care of repairing of hand wash facility, drinking water, etc.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

I. FOR POLICYMAKERS

- *Social Protection of Marginalised Sections:* Policymakers should be made aware of the need to offer social assistance to the marginalized sections and create additional jobs through MGNREGA, to relieve the people from the clutches of poverty and high debt.
- *Protection of Children:* The government should relax the 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, 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 and ensuring that the children's Right to Education is not threatened or violated, even in emergencies.
- *Financial Allocation for Education:* Policymakers should be made conscious of the inadequacy of funding for education and implementation of the norms and provisions of the Right to Education Act.
- *Strengthen Public Education:* The government should give priority to the public education system by strengthening teacher recruitment and infrastructure, and training teachers.
- *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 ICT be a replacement for face-to-face education, but 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 their holistic development. Though National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the Right to Education (RTE) Act made attempts on this front, 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 the dropout of children in the post-pandemic times 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 fund research and interventions that try to examine and address COVID-19-induced vulnerabilities in aspects related to children's education.

III. FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY

- *Promoting Community Ownership of Schools:* In Rajasthan and Karnataka, the panchayats, school management committees and the community played an active role, while it collapsed in most of the other states. Other states should replicate and adopt these successful models.
- *Active Involvement of PRIs and SMCs:* Panchayats and SMCs should be actively involved in school strengthening activities and should be 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 tabulated here:

Table: 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supply of emergency kits, food supplements, dry rations, etc. during emergency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy on the need for social protection measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity building of ASHA, Anganwadi workers, SHGs, community, etc. on immediate response measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey on social protection of vulnerable people
Collection of real-time data on child vulnerabilities and addressing the concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy on the lack of updated data on child vulnerabilities • Advocacy on the exclusion of eligible children from accessing COVID-19 relief in the case of parental death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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, houses, schools, etc. • Involving volunteers or community mobilizers to monitor and check child vulnerabilities
Strengthening the public education system on aspects of teacher recruitment, training and infrastructure building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designing the curriculum of training modules of the teacher training institutes • Handholding public schools in meeting their requirements post reopening • Resource mobilization for interventions on infrastructure building of government schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy on teacher recruitment and quality of teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 handle future emergencies/school closure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment study on teacher shortage • Policy brief on the inadequacy of funds to meet COVID-19 challenges
Recognition of ICT as a tool to cope with any emergency, rather than as a replacement for face-to-face education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridging the gap in ICT wherever possible to facilitate children without digital access • Continuation of community learning activities to ensure face-to-face learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy through policy brief on the advantages and disadvantages of digital education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity building of teachers on using ICT as a tool for education • Counselling sessions with children to deal with mobile addiction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Awareness drive with parents on the need to send their children to school and ensure regular attendance post reopening ● Ensure regular supply of nutritional meals and supplements to children in Anganwadi centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advocacy when (nutritional meal) right to food and education are not ensured 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capacity building of Anganwadi workers and teachers on handling children in the post-reopening phase ● Handholding support to Anganwadi teachers on their requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Monitoring the functioning of Anganwadi centres
	School Education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 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 to 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advocacy on the inadequate funding to meet RTE norms and requirements ● Advocacy when MDM/dry ration and education are not ensured 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capacity building of teachers on handling children in the post-reopening phase ● Handholding support to teachers on their requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Monitoring the functioning of schools
Widening the definition of learning and planning and executing interventions for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Developing toolkits for teachers on holistic learning of children ● Learning interventions to address the learning gap of children especially in Classes III-V 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Debate and dialogue with parliamentarians, NGOs, academicians, etc. on the concept of holistic learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teacher training on holistic learning of children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Through policy briefs and field surveys, highlight the narrow definition of learning

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

