Inclusive COVID-19 Recovery: Education for Vulnerable Groups

In collaboration with GIZ

It is widely recognized that equal access to quality education plays a catalytic role in improving economic, political, health, cultural and social development outcomes throughout the world. Pakistan being a signatory to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Global Partnership for Education has pledged to provide education to every child without discrimination.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has significant implications on educational outcomes as it affected academic continuity and learning as well as increased disparities and magnified vulnerabilities. All education institutions in Pakistan remained closed till September 2020. The Government of Pakistan (GoP) opened schools, colleges, and universities phase-wise in September. However, they were again closed in November 2020 till January 2021 due to the second wave of COVID-19. Its third wave again led to the closure of all institutions from February-September 2021, with some exceptions in low positivity rate districts. These closures pose a serious threat to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development overall, particularly SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education. In Pakistan around 50 million children were affected (Tabassum et al. 2020). According to World Bank estimates, it is expected that approximately one million children will drop out of school because of deteriorated economic condition of their families during the pandemic. Given that Pakistan is one of the countries with highest out-of-school children (OOSC) rate (22.8 million), there is urgent need to develop a strategy to ensure education access for these additional 4.2% OOSC as well. School closures also increased the gap between the expected year of schooling and learning adjusted years. Job losses are also likely to worsen the existing educational disparities and child labour. Geographical disparities, particularly for children from rural areas and urban slums, are also expected to worsen.

Gender disparity in the education sector was a policy concern that existed even before COVID-19 as 44% of enrolled students (at the primary and secondary level) were girls compared to 56% boys, and 41% of girls compared to 33% boys dropped out of school before completing primary education (Shah et al. 2021). Similarly, Afghan refugee children of school-going age (37% of 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees), further added to the fragility of Pakistan’s education system (UNHCR 2019), given the limited resources. According to one 2020 study, about 80% of registered school-going age Afghan refugee children are OOS. Those enrolled in primary schools also failed to continue their education to the next level. Lack of education/school facilities in Afghan refugee camps (Ibid.) as well as in public schools is another major issue (Hunter 2020). Poverty and parental attitude towards education (The Express Tribune 2021) are among the factors behind this situation.

Although the government’s ed-tech response during the pandemic played a major role in continuing education during the lockdowns, a weak technological infrastructure, limited internet access and little knowledge about modern technologies resulted in exacerbated inequities of education access and quality. For instance, lack of access to digital devices made remote learning impossible for 23% children and 36%
youth in Pakistan (Abid 2021). Similarly, Crawfurd et al. (2021) reflected that children from educated families were 37% more likely to watch the tele-school than children from uneducated/illiterate families. Hence, there is a gap in terms of COVID-19’s impact on vulnerable groups including Afghan refugees, children with disabilities, and the extent to which the current pandemic made the situation worse in terms of education access, retention, quality and gender disparity. Understanding the pandemic’s impact on education is crucial to design inclusive responses and to come up with concrete recommendations.

The panel will offer an opportunity for discussion on these issues, with a specific focus on vulnerable groups in Pakistan. Good practices of how other developing countries coped with COVID-19 with regards to education will also be shared. Furthermore, the panel will also discuss how to create linkages between government, private, civil society and development partners for ensuring access to quality education for vulnerable groups. Key discussion points of the panel will include:

- Impact of COVID on education in disadvantaged geographical areas, vulnerable groups including girls, children with disabilities, and Afghan refugees,
- Adequacy of the education system for the provision of education to the disadvantaged segment of society, particularly in terms of access, retention, and learning,
- Assessment of the experience of remote learning and education technology during school closures,
- Exogenous factors such as socioeconomic and cultural barriers to promote inclusive education in Pakistan, and,
- Way forward to improve education outcomes for vulnerable groups.

References


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