

INSIGHT

Closing the Digital Divide in Sri Lanka amid COVID-19



Poor students without access to a reliable internet service or device are more disadvantaged than before. Photo credit: ADB.
The shift to online learning due to COVID-19 has increased the risk of poor children falling further behind in their studies.

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Introduction

Sri Lanka has been providing universal free education including university education. For children aged 5 to 14, education is compulsory since 1998. These led to 98% school attendance for boys and girls in this age group. However, a significant number of children drop out of formal education after the age of 14 because of poverty.

Following the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), school closures and the sudden shift to online learning have increased the risk of poor children falling further behind in their studies.

Policymakers need to bridge the digital divide, expand opportunities for technical education, and promote quality, equitable, and inclusive education to help the poor and vulnerable escape from the intergenerational poverty trap.

Analysis

Many poor children drop out after the compulsory age for schooling.

One-fifth of poor children drop out of formal school education after the age of 14 and another two thirds, after the age of 16. Most of the poor children (15-16 years old) left the education system due to poor educational progress (36.6%), financial problems (22.1%), or household work (8.6%).

The 2016 Household Income and Expenditure Survey showed that the per capita energy consumption of poor households with children aged 5 to 18 years is less than 75% or 1,513 kilo calories per capita a day of the recommended energy requirement of 2,030. Meanwhile, the corresponding average consumption of nonpoor households is 2,081. The inadequate nutritional intake could restrict children's progress at school.

It is necessary to consider both poor and near-poor children as there is a strong possibility for some of the near-poor children to slip into poverty because of COVID-19. The proportions of early school leavers are very high for poor and near-poor children, compared to nonpoor.

There is also a significant gender gap, especially among the poor and near-poor. Unlike in most Asian countries, a higher proportion of boys age 17–18 (73.6%) drop out earlier than girls (53.9%), in Sri Lanka.

COVID-19 aggravates the chances of poor children to continue their education.

Not all children have the necessary facilities or means for online learning during prolonged curfews, lockdowns, or when schools are kept closed indefinitely. According to a computer literacy survey, only 22.2% of households in Sri Lanka own a desktop or laptop computer. Around 1.67 million (7.814 per 100 people) are fixed internet subscribers while approximately 34.11% of the population has internet access in 2019. The use of smartphones is limited especially in remote rural areas where broadband internet facilities are weak.

The poor, near-poor, and even some of the nonpoor children do not have adequate access to online learning, which could adversely affect their learning progress. The Ministry of Education's national e-learning portal E-Thakshilawa was designed to facilitate e-learning for grades 1 to advanced levels especially during the prolonged closure of schools but was mostly inaccessible to the poor and vulnerable due to lack of facilities and resources.

The television broadcast of the ministry's distance learning programs, such as Guru Gedara, target those without access to online learning facilities. Around 86% of households in the country own televisions. The lessons are delivered in both Sinhala and Tamil languages. The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation broadcasts the lessons that cover science and technology, mathematics, and language subjects, especially in rural and estate areas.

The pandemic has also highlighted the need for more teachers who are trained in information and

advanced technology. Retaining capable teachers especially in remote areas could be a major issue as such teachers will be in demand elsewhere. It may be necessary for the government to consider providing special incentives to competent and dedicated teachers who volunteer to work in remote areas.

Recommendations

- Give priority to ensuring access to quality education in any stream (e.g., science, technology, commerce, arts) for every student irrespective of their social background, ethnicity, where they live or whether they are differently abled. Inclusive, equitable, and quality education is a prerequisite to break from the intergenerational poverty trap and to reduce the persistently high income inequality in Sri Lanka.
- Expedite the implementation of 4G or fiber broadband facilities across the country and provide internet facilities to all schools and TV sets to schools in areas with limited resources or without any IT facilities.
- With the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), monitor the demand for advance skills and review the school curriculum to ensure that it consistently suits the rapidly changing demands of the world.
- Increase the compulsory age for formal education to at least 16 years and implement as soon as possible.
- Improve and expand opportunities for vocational and technical education. Ensure that children of poorer households will have access to such programs.

Resources

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