



# Learning in times of lockdown: how Covid-19 is affecting education and food security in India

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## Abstract

A vast majority of the relief and rehabilitation packages announced in the months following the nationwide lockdown in India have focused on economic rehabilitation. However, the education sector has remained absent from this effort, including in India's central government's 250 billion dollar stimulus package. In this paper, we discuss the implications of lockdown-induced school and rural child-care center closures on education and health outcomes for the urban and rural poor. We especially focus on food and nutritional security of children who depend on school feeding and supplementary nutrition programs. We argue that the impacts are likely to be much more severe for girls as well as for children from already disadvantaged ethnic and caste groups. We also discuss ways in which existing social security programs can be leveraged and strengthened to ameliorate these impacts.

**Keywords** School feeding programs · Covid-19 · Education · Maternal nutrition · Nutrition security · Child health · Gender

With India slowly starting to open its economy back up, following months of nationwide Covid-19 induced lockdown, schools and colleges across the country have now been shut for over three months. Even as the lockdown ends, it is unlikely that educational institutions will re-open for months. This closure has come at a critical point in the education calendar of India, marked by school final assessments, school leaving examinations and entrance tests for undergraduate and post-graduate courses. What does this disruption imply for students across the socio-economic spectrum, both in terms of learning outcomes and food and economic security, and how can policymakers mitigate these impacts? In this article we discuss some of the consequences of the lockdown on the education sector and the steps that have been taken by various state and central bodies to address these. Finally, we suggest ways in which existing social security nets and provisions can be strengthened to support young and school-age children affected by the lockdown.

## 1 Impact on dropout rates

According to UNESCO, approximately 0.32 billion students in India have been affected by school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO 2020). Of these, almost 84% reside in rural areas while 70% attend government schools. As of 2015, the average dropout rate across secondary schools in India was 17.06% with higher numbers for rural areas (NUEPA 2016). Past evidence suggests that short term disruptions in schooling often lead to permanent dropouts among the poor (Reddy and Sinha 2010). One reason for this is the loss of parents' employment for which child labour is leveraged as a substitute. The inevitable economic backlash of the lockdown is likely to reduce the earning capacity for many poor households and may increase the opportunity cost of sending children to school, especially in rural India. As a result, children may be pushed into the labour market (Bharadwaj et al. 2019).

Dropout rates are likely to be even more severe for girls who are often left out of household resource allocation decisions (Prakash et al. 2017). Girls may also be required to undertake additional household responsibilities as parents increase their own labour hours to cope with economic distress. Similarly, these economic shocks are likely to have a greater impact on children from communities that are marginalized on the basis of their caste, tribe and religion, and already experience higher dropout rates (NUEPA 2016). Dropping out, in

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turn, may lead to increases in child marriages, domestic violence, early pregnancies and a plethora of other development issues (Birchall 2018). Without school fee waivers in the interim, dropout rates are likely to get further exacerbated as educational expenses become unaffordable for many. Although some states governments such as those of Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Jharkhand tried to initiate waivers for tuition and other school expenses during the lockdown period, private schools were unwilling to implement these measures.

## 2 Impact on inequality and disparity

A key step taken by some educational institutions to ensure continuation of curriculum has been to shift lectures online, requiring both students and teachers to use personal home computers and reliable internet. If school and university examinations happen as scheduled, without compensatory classes, it is likely to disadvantage students who cannot access these computer and network resources. However, postponement of examinations can cause a delay for students in entering the job market.

The discourse on education during the lockdown period has been essentially focused on online or televised learning. In fact, the only mention of education in the Government of India's USD 260 billion fiscal stimulus package is in the context of online and digital learning platforms. A number of Indian states including Mizoram, West Bengal and Kashmir have implemented daily televised lectures as the Human Resource Development (education) Ministry ties up with television service providers to allocate specific channels for this purpose. However, these measures preclude the rural and urban poor with limited or no access to electricity and network resources. Moreover, online classes are being facilitated largely for students who attend urban private schools, and already outperform government school students on most indicators of learning (Annual Status of Education Report 2018). The higher use of online learning platforms by private schools will increase this disparity.

## 3 Impact on nutrition and food security

One of the most important consequences of the lockdown and subsequent school closures has been the temporary suspension of mid-day meals and supplementary nutrition programs, which has widespread and important implications for the nutrition and food security of children across the nation. The Mid-day Meal (MDM) program in India is the largest school feeding program in the world (World Food Programme 2013), catering to about 144 million children, with approximately 80% coverage across primary school students (Chowdhury

2019). This flagship program aims to provide cooked meals to all government primary school children, meeting a stipulated minimum calorie and protein requirement. Yet, nearly half of all Indian children are undernourished, both in terms of weight-for-age as well as height-for-age, with girls disproportionately affected (IIPS and ICF 2017). Despite regional disparities in outreach and food quality, MDMs have been found to significantly improve enrolment, attendance, retention, learning outcomes, gender and social equity and most importantly nutrition (Afridi 2011; Sarma et al. 1995; Singh et al. 2014; Aurino et al. 2019). The MDM program, besides eliminating classroom hunger, also addresses health issues such as micronutrient deficiencies and mass deworming. In case of economically disadvantaged families, MDM's school meals act more as a substitute rather than a complementary meal, protecting against endemic hunger for the entire family. The months of lockdown in India have already caused supply chain disruptions in the agriculture sector, leading to food shortages (Reardon et al. 2020). Interruption in school feeding programs is thus likely to exacerbate food insecurity, particularly for those who are already under-nourished, especially girls, who like older women, eat last and eat less at home, compared to boys and men.

Similarly, disruption in the supplementary nutrition program delivered under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme is likely to affect over 100 million pregnant and lactating mothers, and children under the age of 6, who rely on Anganwadi centres (rural child care centres) for both cooked meals and take home rations to meet basic nutritional needs. Lack of access to school feeding and supplementary nutrition programs is likely to further endanger already precarious food security for urban and rural poor, which may have long term health and economic impacts.

## 4 What is the way forward?

Policy makers and educators in other countries have responded in different ways to minimize the impact of the disruptions on students across all levels of education. In China, a country India often finds itself compared to, economically disadvantaged students are being provided mobile data and computer subsidies to tide through the lockdown. The Global Partnership for Education has recently announced a \$250 million fund to help 67 developing countries (excluding India) cope with immediate and long-term disruptions to education as a result of the pandemic (GPE 2020). This fund, to be utilized with a special focus on girls and poor children, aims to encourage investments in learning resources that will reach those who will most likely be unable to resume learning when schools reopen.

In India too, local solutions by several state governments have been implemented, but there is scope for much more.

Home delivered meals/dry ration to school and Angadwadi children in certain southern states (Kerala, Telangana, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh) have benefited millions of children and expecting mothers already. Other measures including data packages for students, TV broadcasted classes and regular SMS/IVR to parents for daily activities with children are currently underway.

Moving forward, the immediate need is to expand access to nutritious food for all children eligible for school feeding programs nationwide. In addition, re-directing locally produced horticultural crops to households under the MDM and ICDS umbrella can help improve nutrient content and diet diversity for children and provide temporary relief to farmers through local procurement, an idea that has proven to be successful in other contexts (Singh and Fernandes 2018).

Along with interventions in the education sector, initiatives are also needed to cushion the economic impact on poor families to discourage the use of child labour along with monitoring mechanisms set up to ensure children remain in school, whenever they re-open. There is also the issue of mental stress and trauma that young children may be facing, both as a result of reduced mobility due to the lockdown and the economic stress being faced by families- an issue that has remained largely absent from the current discourse. In such a context, collaborative effort between the public sector, the private sector, and the civil society would be critical for educational and social rehabilitation of affected children. As health and economy occupies the centre stage, educational and nutritional considerations must not be forgotten so as to not undo the hard-earned gains in these sectors over the past few decades.

**Data Availability** Not applicable.

**Code Availability** Not applicable.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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