



Building back better: Reflections on the impacts of the pandemic and economic crisis on school education in Sri Lanka

The pre-emptive measures implemented in response to the pandemic significantly altered life as we knew it, with drastic changes to how we work, socialize, and navigate the world around us. Among those changes was the abrupt shift to online education, as the pandemic prevention mandates kept schools closed for prolonged periods. In Sri Lanka, schools remained fully or partially closed for 71 weeks from March 2020 to the end of 2021 on account of the pandemic, and were closed multiple times in 2022 due to fuel shortages during the economic crisis.¹ UNESCO and UNICEF (2021) estimate that just a single day of school closures in Sri Lanka results in a loss of about 25 million learning hours and 1.4 million teaching hours. This underscores the egregious aggregate negative impact that extended school closures have had on educational outcomes in the country.

The transition to online education was rapid, abrupt, and haphazard, predominantly because it was a reactionary adjustment to urgent and unforeseen challenges posed by the evolving situation. In fact, Hodges et al. (2020) have proposed the use of 'Emergency Remote Teaching' as a more realistic term reflecting the teaching modalities adopted during the pandemic. Schools (and other educational institutions) had to quickly adapt and improvise their teaching methods, with little time for planning and preparation. This affected not only the quality of delivery in general but also inclusivity in virtual classrooms. Moreover, studies suggest that the impact of the shift to online education may have been worse for school children compared to students in higher education institutions; smaller children compared to older students; and for academically weaker students compared to students with higher competencies (Hayashi et al., 2020; Hettiarachchi et al., 2021; Pelikan et al., 2021).

¹ Total duration of school closures. Available at: <https://web.archive.unesco.org/web/20220629024039/https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/>

STUDY

The seismic socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic that shocked the world illuminated the fragility of our socioeconomic structures and systems, leading to a growing consensus of not returning to business as usual. Importantly, widening and deepening poverty and inequalities worldwide sparked a critical discussion on reimagining vulnerability, giving us the impetus to design this study within the context of Sri Lanka. The economic crisis that followed on the heels of the pandemic further justified the undertaking of this research study.

The overall study took on a mixed methods approach to data collection. It involved surveying a random sample of 4,000 households in nine districts and conducting in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of 72 respondents from six districts.² and conducted in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of 72 respondents from six districts³. We examined these primary data to explore the impacts of the pandemic and the economic crisis on households and the various socioeconomic vulnerabilities they were grappling with due to these shocks. We also investigated possible reasons for heterogeneities in these impacts to parse characteristics of households at a higher risk of vulnerability in the event of a disruption to normal social order.

This policy brief shares findings from both the qualitative and quantitative research components regarding the impact of education due to the pandemic and the economic crisis experienced by surveyed households (Vithanagama, 2024; Vithanagama and Gunatilaka, 2024). We anticipate our findings will inform policy, projects and programmes of state and non-state actors in the education realms.

² Colombo, Kandy, Galle, Jaffna, Ampara, Kurunegala, Anuradhapura, Badulla and Ratnapura which had the highest confirmed COVID hospitalisations in each of the nine provinces, as of June, 2022.

³ Colombo, Kurunegala, Matara, Badulla, Trincomalee and Killinochchi which had the highest, moderate and least numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases as of June 2022.

RESULTS

Transition to online education has resulted in a significant drop in the quality of education. Our quantitative and qualitative analyses concur that there has been a sharp decline in the quality of education after the shift to online teaching. The majority (53.5 percent) of respondents among surveyed households believe that, compared to 2019, the quality of school education has dropped. However, this proportion is higher among households that do not own laptops, tablets, or smartphones, or do not have an internet connection, than in households that own these devices or have an internet connection.

The qualitative data confirms these observations but also brings out further insights into the decline in the quality of online education during the pandemic. First, the shift involved a steep learning curve for teachers, parents, and students. Secondly, teachers found it much more challenging to keep students engaged and focused. Due to concerns about data consumption, teachers could not mandate students to use video during online sessions. Thirdly, sometimes teachers had to schedule classes at night during off-peak internet hours as they could not afford the internet bills. This scheduling hindered the participation of students without devices or reliable internet connections, as they were unable to travel to friends' or neighbours' houses during late hours. Finally, opportunities to copy, cheat, and plagiarize in assignments and tests were much higher in the online class setup, which may have contributed substantially to the deterioration in the quality of online education.

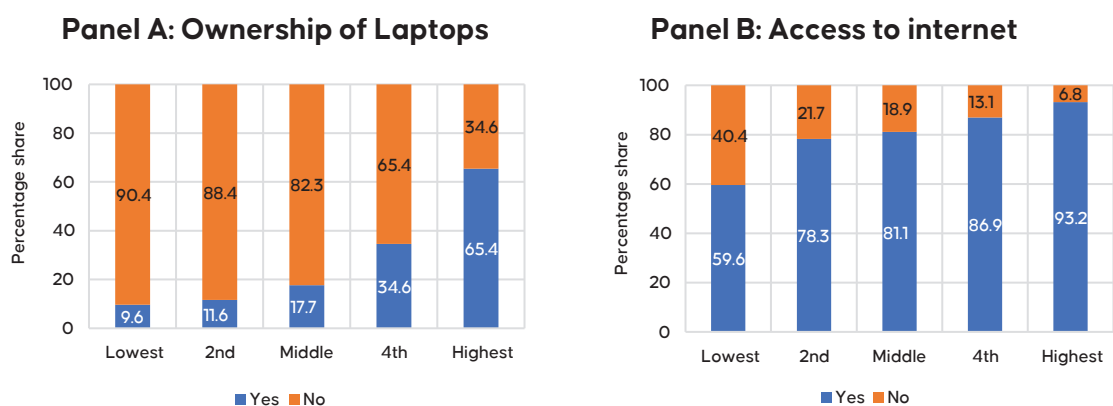
Many households, especially women, have struggled to manage online education. Over a third of surveyed households found it difficult to manage children's online education. The qualitative data provides some reasons as to why. First, the responsibility of disciplining children in virtual classes has shifted from teachers to parents, especially mothers, during the pandemic.

This added to women’s unpaid care burden during the pandemic, especially mothers of small children who found it challenging to get their children to sit in front of a computer in a virtual classroom. In some instances, women’s efforts to discipline children led to household tensions and made them vulnerable to verbal and emotional abuse, especially in extended households with in-laws. Secondly, we observed that parents, mostly mothers, were concerned about children’s excessive engagement with mobile phones and playing video games, as well as the age-appropriateness of what they watched online. Thirdly, in some instances, parents were not digitally literate to help children navigate the

teaching platforms. Finally, the emotional burden of being unable to purchase devices for children to participate in online classes, and therefore children having to miss out on a few, several or many virtual classes bore heavily on parents.

Children from poor and vulnerable households faced new inequalities in accessing education during the pandemic. From our household data, we observed that proportionately more poor households did not have essential infrastructure such as laptops, tablets, smartphones, or a reliable internet connection, which are necessary for facilitating participation in online classes. (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Access to infrastructure facilitating online education



Source: KLIE Household survey (2022)

Qualitative findings concur, providing rich examples of divergences in access to education during the pandemic. In many households, children had to participate in online classes through parents’ devices. In a handful of examples, when the parent with the device had to go to work during the pandemic (as they were health sector workers), children had to skip classes. While many households managed to secure at least a smartphone during the early stages of the shift to online teaching, this was still insufficient if more than one child had virtual classes scheduled at the same time. The poorest households who could not afford to purchase devices had to either send

children to neighbors’ houses, or in one instance, send the child to a physical class that was held in hiding, against social distancing regulations. In a few extreme cases, children had to forego online education altogether because parents did not have the means to purchase devices.

The overcrowding in line houses affected children’s ability to effectively participate in online classes. Households living in areas with regular disruptions to electricity supply and poor internet connectivity faced difficulties for children attending online classes. Challenges in purchasing mobile data cards, as shops were closed due to curfews, also

created barriers to the participation of online classes among children in a few households.

Educational expenses have increased significantly during the economic crisis. The large majority of surveyed households with children in school experienced an increase in educational expenses. We noted that this burden affected households across all income brackets. Most households also struggled to pay for tuition, although only a small proportion could not afford to pay at all. The share of households that struggled to pay for tuition was disproportionately higher in lower income brackets. Qualitative findings enrich these observations. Clearly, the increase in educational expenses was a new challenge most households faced during the economic crisis. Many households struggled to manage educational expenses amidst rising costs of school supplies, tuition fees, and increased transportation costs due to fuel price hikes. These challenges were exacerbated in households with several school-going children.

Education-based coping mechanisms were infrequent, but when taken up, they were detrimental. Relatively fewer households have resorted to coping measures that affect children's educational outcomes. Only about a fifth of the surveyed households with children in full-time education have cut down on educational expenses in response to difficulties in managing household expenses with available income. The more nuanced qualitative analysis concurs with these findings and elicits challenges that have led households to resort to such detrimental measures, with potential long-term negative effects on household human capital.

First, education-based coping measures were more common if households grappled with the double jeopardy of reduced incomes and increased expenses. Income reductions were an additional challenge mainly among households earning income from agriculture, business, and non-agricultural informal work. In such households,

parents were forced to stop or cut down on tuition classes, especially if they were extracurricular. Children had to use public transport or walk to school instead of private transport. In one extreme case, several boys in the estate sector had dropped out of school to go in search of work in Colombo.

Another significant example of potential long-term implications we encountered was households being forced to liquidate savings earmarked for children's education in order to finance day-to-day expenses.

Education is perceived as an important pathway to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and vulnerability. Our qualitative findings show that despite facing numerous challenges, parents, especially mothers, demonstrated strong dedication to maintaining the continuity and quality of their children's education, even at the height of the pandemic. Many parents wanted their children to obtain a good education and to engage in types of jobs that can withstand the impacts of external shocks, which only a good education can secure. Many of them perceived education as a way out for their children from the poverty they were grappling with. Several parents spoke of how they discouraged their children's suggestions to drop out of school and pursue livelihood opportunities, even though households were struggling to make ends meet.

The quantitative findings validate these opinions about the positive impacts of education on enhancing resilience against unanticipated shocks. The quantitative analysis demonstrates that good educational outcomes bolster a household's ability to withstand vulnerability to shocks by facilitating access to good jobs, higher incomes, savings, assets, and other financial resources, as well as fostering strong social networks. All these factors are important in strengthening a household's ability to withstand, cope with, and recover from the impacts of external shocks.



POLICY REFLECTIONS

The makeshift nature of online teaching during the pandemic is not a blueprint for potential hybrid teaching modalities in schools. Online teaching methods during the pandemic in Sri Lanka are more indicative of Emergency Response Teaching rather than a comprehensive and robust alternative teaching ecosystem. While the shift to online teaching was preferable to the prospect of no schooling at all, we must acknowledge the new inequalities it has introduced in access to education, further exacerbating the marginalisation of economically disadvantaged children from educational opportunities. Without addressing infrastructural and digital inequities that hinder full participation among children from all economic backgrounds, online education cannot serve as a viable alternative to or be integrated effectively into a traditional physical classroom setting.

The educational landscape must be strengthened with structured online and hybrid modalities of education. If returning to business as usual is not a desired option, as we discussed at the outset, then there should be a systematic plan to enhance the online education space in Sri Lanka. This plan should not only comprise physical resources but also focus on human capacity building and ensuring reliable, robust, and affordable internet connectivity across the country. Additionally, improved and enforceable regulations on cybersecurity are essential. Importantly, all schools must have similar levels of infrastructure, digital resources, and human capital to ensure equitable benefits from using smart classrooms and hybrid teaching methods.

Improving quality of education and closing the digital divide are prerequisites for fostering inclusive education. Private tuition often fills the gaps in the quality of free school education in Sri Lanka. Measures to enhance the quality of education

and its delivery in schools, such as increased fiscal spending and targeted support from development partners, are crucial to ensure that children from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, who cannot afford private tuition, are not left out. Furthermore, closing inequalities in access to digital devices and internet connectivity through subsidies, concessionary loans, and other support for low-income students and sub-national schools is critical for creating an inclusive education environment.

REFERENCES

- Alwang, J., Siegel, P. B., & Jorgensen, S. L. (2001). *Vulnerability: A view from different disciplines* (23304; Social Protection Discussion Paper Series No. 0115). The World Bank. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/wbk/hdnspu/23304.html>
- Hayashi, R., Garcia, M., Maddawin, A., & Hewagamage, K. P. (2020). *Online Learning in Sri Lanka's Higher Education Institutions during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Sri Lanka). Asian Development Bank. <https://www.adb.org/publications/online-learning-sri-lanka-during-covid-19>
- Hettiarachchi, S., Damayanthi, B. W. R., Heenkenda, S., Dissanayake, D., Ranagalage, M., & Ananda, L. (2021). Student Satisfaction with Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Study at State Universities in Sri Lanka. *Sustainability*, 13(21), Article 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132111749>
- Hodges, C. B., Moore, S., Lockee, B. B., Trust, T., & Bond, M. A. (2020). *The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning* [Educause Review]. Educause. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>
- Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative [OPHI] and United National Development Programme [UNDP]. (2023). *Understanding Multidimensional Vulnerabilities: Impact on People of Sri Lanka—A Policy Report Based on the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index derived from UNDP's National Citizen Survey 2022-2023*. UNDP. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-10/undp-multidimensional_vulnerability_report_sri_lanka.pdf
- Pelikan, E. R., Lüftenegger, M., Holzer, J., Korlat, S., Spiel, C., & Schober, B. (2021). Learning during COVID-19: The role of self-regulated learning, motivation, and procrastination for perceived competence. *Zeitschrift Für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 24(2), 393–418. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11618-021-01002-x>
- UNESCO & UNICEF. (2021). *Sri Lanka Case Study :Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in Asia*.
- Vithanagama, R. (2024). *Vulnerability in the Light of COVID-19: A Qualitative Study*. International Centre for Ethnic Studies.
- Vithanagama, R., & Gunatilaka, R. (2024). *Vulnerability in the Light of COVID-19: A Quantitative Study*. International Centre for Ethnic Studies.
- Zhang, H., Zhao, Y., & Pedersen, J. (2020). Capital assets framework for analysing household vulnerability during disaster. *Disasters*, 44(4), 687–707. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12393>

International Centre for Ethnic Studies

*2, Kynsey Terrace,
Colombo 8, Sri Lanka.*