Press Release: Education

80% of children left without access to education during school closures

12 November 2021

A recent national survey showed that only 20% of school-aged children who were enrolled in the formal education system received remote education during COVID-19 induced school closures. School aged children were considered those between the ages of 5 and 18.

The survey was conducted by LIRNEasia, a regional think tank working on digital policy issues across the Asia Pacific, and ICRIER, a policy oriented economic policy think tank based out of New Delhi.

The 2021 survey showed that access to education was greater among students residing in urban areas, from wealthier families, with more educated household heads, and in higher grades.

Many of the 20% who were able to access education during school closures did so through multiple channels. However, these students' experiences were heterogeneous. Only 55% of students (of this small group who received some education) participated in live (real time) online lessons, while 68% watched recorded video lessons and 75% had information and assignments communicated to their smartphones through channels such as WhatsApp. It is also noteworthy that 58% of these students also had contact with schools through offline channels, with information and assignments being physically delivered to their homes.

The other 80% of children, however, were left behind.

The challenges faced by those receiving and not receiving education also differed. The parents of those who received education said their key challenges were their children not being attentive, schools being unprepared to deliver online education and high data costs. Meanwhile, the most cited challenges of those who didn't receive education were poor connectivity (3G and 4G signal) in their area, and insufficient devices at home to meet the competing needs of all their family members.

The survey was conducted by LIRNEasia, a regional think tank working on digital policy issues across the Asia Pacific, and ICRIER, a policy-oriented economic policy think tank based out of New Delhi. The survey findings were released at a virtual launch event conducted on 12 November 2021, which included a panel discussion with leading government, private sector and civil society representatives. Panelists included Dr. Jaijit Bhattacharya (President, Centre for Digital Economy Policy Research), Abhishek Singh (President & CEO, National e-Governance Division, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology), Nishanth Baghel (Director of

Technology Innovations, Pratham) and Helani Galpaya (CEO, LIRNEasia). The discussion was moderated by Dr. Rajat Kathuria (Senior Visiting Professor, ICRIER).

"The pandemic made the education gap worse, impacting students from disadvantaged households the most. But it wasn't just a connectivity problem - schools were caught off-guard and were not prepared to deliver online lessons in the first round of lockdowns. Luckily things did improve in the subsequent shut downs. But unless a mix of real-time online and self directed learning and meaningful feedback is provided, the learning gaps probably were not bridged" said the CEO of LIRNEasia, Helani Galpaya.

According to Dr. Rajat Kathuria, Senior Visiting Professor at ICRIER, "School children were amongst the most affected by the pandemic. Our survey findings confirm the widening of the education divide as several households without internet devices were unable to organise remote learning for their children. Even where devices and connectivity were available, the system took time to adapt to online learning. Education policy needs much more than network infrastructure for material impact on learning outcomes"

About the research: The research was conducted by LIRNEasia and ICRIER, and funded by IDRC through a joint grant given to three regional think tanks: LIRNEasia, Research ICT Africa and Instituto de Estudios Peruanos. The nationally representative sample for the survey consisted of 7,000 households across India including 350 villages and wards. The sampling methodology has been designed to ensure representation of the target group (population aged 15-65) at a national level with a confidence level of 95-percent and a +/-1.7% margin of error. The data also allows for disaggregation by urban/rural divide, gender and socio-economic classification at the national level and at the state level for 4 focal states, Delhi, Assam, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra.

About LIRNEasia: LIRNEasia is an Asia Pacific ICT policy and regulation think tank. Its mission is to catalyze policy change through research to improve people's lives in the emerging Asia Pacific by facilitating their use of hard and soft infrastructures through the use of knowledge, information and technology.
For more information see https://lirneasia.net/

About ICRIER: ICRIER is an autonomous economic policy think tank. ICRIER's main focus is to enhance the knowledge content of policy making by undertaking analytical research that is targeted at informing India's policy makers. The Digital Economy, Startup and Innovation (DESI) team at ICRIER is deeply invested in areas of digital access, internet governance and market competition.
For more information see http://icrier.org/

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