

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022

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APC would like to thank the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for their support for Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022.

Published by APC

2022

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Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022 web and e-book

ISBN 978-92-95113-52-7

APC-202211-CIPP-R-EN-DIGITAL-342

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BANGLADESH

A “LEARNING LOSS”: ONLINE EDUCATION DURING THE PANDEMIC IN BANGLADESH



Bytesforall Bangladesh

Partha Sarker and Munir Hasan

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Introduction

Although the right to education is not a fundamental right contained in the Bangladeshi constitution,¹ Article 17 of the constitution states clearly that the state shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of:

- Establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such a stage as may be determined by law.
- Relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs.
- Removing illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law.

The government provides elementary education free of charge in public schools, available to all at the age of six. Secondary education is not totally free; students still have to pay tuition fees, but usually receive stipends and subsidies to cover different costs.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government decided to close all educational institutions including primary and secondary schools for all in-person classes starting from 18 March 2020. After nearly 18 months of closure, the schools first partially opened on 11 September 2021. But the schools closed again until they fully re-opened on 1 March 2022. More than 36 million students (including 17 million in primary education) and one million teachers could not attend 120,000 primary and secondary schools during that period of time.² UNESCO suggests that it was one of the most restrictive school closures in the world.³

The government did put alternative education streams in place. It ran online classes via Facebook Live, Zoom and the Ministry of Education website.⁴ A YouTube channel – Amar Ghore, Amar School⁵ (My School is at My Home) – was also developed, and “Parliament TV” and radio were used to air recorded classes for students through an initiative called Ghore Boshe Shikhi (Let’s Learn at Home).

However, the school closure and long absence of in-person classes changed the entire landscape of learning in Bangladesh. The new phenomenon of online classes introduced the old debate of the digital divide and connectivity gap. Existing inequalities in terms of access to information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure, connectivity, content and opportunities exposed the impossibility of learning outcomes for many poorer communities in the country. The digital divide translated into a learning divide.

Context

Bangladesh is a success story in terms of providing access to primary and secondary level education, particularly for female students. The country’s net enrolment rate at the primary school level increased from 80% in 2000 to 98% in 2015,⁶ and 120% in 2020.⁷ This rate can exceed 100% due to the inclusion of over-aged and under-aged students because of early or late school entrance and grade repetition. Secondary school net enrolment was around 74% in 2020,⁸ up from 54% in 2015 and 45% in 2000.⁹ These are all pre-pandemic figures – but with the pandemic the situation changed a lot.

As the schools went online, access to the internet, computers and electricity became all too real a question. Some pre-pandemic data on accessibility and

1 <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-367.html>

2 Uddin, M. (2020, 13 June). Effects of the pandemic on the education sector in Bangladesh. *The Financial Express*. <https://www.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/effects-of-the-pandemic-on-the-education-sector-in-bangladesh-1592061447>; see also: <https://azi.gov.bd/publication/teachers-portal>

3 <https://covid19.uis.unesco.org/global-monitoring-school-closures-covid19/country-dashboard>

4 <http://digitalcontent.ictd.gov.bd/index.php/site/index>

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly88k5t6Wjw&list=PLoIjsUv06bOXsEkuj8EH-wniEHomrd6Ps>

6 World Bank. (2016, 13 October). Ensuring Education for All Bangladeshis. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2016/10/07/ensuring-education-for-all-bangladeshis>

7 <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/bd>

8 Ibid.

9 Arribas Layton, L., et al. (2021, 8 July). How to provide opportunities for all? From girls’ education to women’s labor force participation in Bangladesh. *World Bank Blogs*. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/how-provide-opportunities-all-girls-education-womens-labor-force-participation-bangladesh>

connectivity will probably be helpful in this regard. A 2019 survey¹⁰ from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) suggests that only 37.6% of households in the country have access to the internet. This data also has a socioeconomic perspective. According to the BBS, only 8.7% of the poorest 20% of households in Bangladesh have internet access at home, compared with 75.3% of the richest 20% of households. The same report also found that only 5.6% of households in Bangladesh have a computer.¹¹

Online education requires uninterrupted high-speed internet or broadband connection. In Bangladesh, the average internet speed is 5 Mbps, which is one of the lowest in South Asia.¹² In many rural households there is only one mobile phone, which the families were unable to dedicate to children's remote learning or online education. Television is an important tool for remote learning. However, the same BBS report¹³ suggests that nationally, only 51% of households own televisions. Out of that, only 4.8% of the poorest 20% of households have a television compared to 90.2% of the richest 20% of households.

To reflect the constitutional guarantee at all levels of education, Bangladesh formulated its National Education Policy in 2010.¹⁴ The primary objectives of this policy are directed toward the cultivation of human values and seeking ways through which citizens can be groomed to become leaders in pro-people development programmes and other initiatives geared towards the progress of the society. The education policy also attached importance to ICTs along with STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) to build up “digital Bangladesh” and a knowledge-based society.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) in Bangladesh first thought and strategised about using ICTs in education in 2012 through the Master Plan for Information and Communication Technology in Education (2012-2021).¹⁵ The plan was expected to result in education for all, an improvement in the standard of education, a skilled workforce, and the eradication of the digital divide and discrimination. One of

the objectives of the use of ICTs in education was to make education services accessible “at the doorsteps” of people – an objective which was tested during the pandemic.

A review on the implementation of the Master Plan in 2019¹⁶ (prior to the pandemic) shows that some progress had been made in enhancing the teaching and learning environment by using ICTs in classrooms (the aim was one laptop and one projector per classroom) and getting teachers to co-create and share digital content via the teachers' portal managed by the Ministry of Education.¹⁷ But as the review suggests, many schools were still lagging in acquiring devices and connectivity. In semi-urban and rural areas in particular, learners and teachers were still facing significant challenges due to limited infrastructure, and when ICT facilities existed, inadequate internet connectivity meant they could not be properly used.

This baseline information was important to understand the context of education when the pandemic hit hard in Bangladesh and the schools were closed. During the pandemic, the MoE's teachers' portal had to be repurposed. Teachers were encouraged to be “ICT for education ambassadors” and to initiate and facilitate online classes, collaborating on and co-creating content. More than 100,000 classes have been added to the teachers' portal for online delivery.¹⁸

Inequalities in the time of the school closure

The pandemic-related lockdown probably had the toughest impact in the education sector of Bangladesh. When the primary and secondary schools were first closed for in-person classes, millions of students and parents were clueless about their next course of action. Eventually, the schools were closed for such a long time that Sheldon Yett, the UNICEF representative to Bangladesh, emphasised that “schools should be among the last institutions to close, and among the first to reopen, as we put in measures to tackle infection waves.”¹⁹

This long closure coupled with a lack of access to internet connectivity not only created a learning divide, but also a learning loss. For example, in three rounds of COVID-19 follow-up surveys, studies by

10 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2019). *Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019: Key Findings*. http://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/b343a8b4_956b_45ca_872f_4cf9b2f1a6e0/37817b8e25d0d6c1f442e294921ff85e.pdf

11 Uddin, M. (2020, 13 June). Op. cit.

12 Prothom Alo. (2018, 24 April). Internet speed is slowest in Bangladesh. *Prothom Alo*. <https://en.prothomalo.com/science-technology/Internet-speed-is-slowest-in-Bangladesh>

13 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2019). Op. cit.

14 <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/national-education-policy-2010-enbn>

15 https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/bangladesh_master_plan_ict.pdf

16 Ministry of Education. (2019). *Master Plan for ICT in Education in Bangladesh (2012-2021): Progress Review Report 2019*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000372984/PDF/372984eng.pdf.multi>

17 <http://www.teachers.gov.bd>

18 Ibid.

19 UNICEF Bangladesh. (2022, 24 January). COVID-19: Scale of education loss 'nearly insurmountable', warns UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/press-releases/covid-19-scale-education-loss-nearly-insurmountable-warns-unicef>

the Population Council²⁰ suggested that one third of girls or less (21%, 16% and 34% in round 1, round 2 and round 3, respectively) followed televised classes. Time spent studying declined drastically: while pre-pandemic average study time was seven to eight hours per day, this declined to two hours per day during COVID-19-related school closures.

Numeracy and literacy scores have declined significantly. The World Bank identifies this learning loss as learning poverty, which is defined as a lack of ability to read and understand a simple story at 10 years of age. Prior to the pandemic, this learning poverty was 56% in Bangladesh, but after the long school closure and non-functional and poorly designed remote learning, this rate may have gone up to 70%.²¹

Another World Bank study²² shows that the disruptions have already led to a decline in student learning and retention. Bangladesh's learning adjusted years of schooling (LAYS) are expected to fall from 6.0 years in 2019 to 5.3 years in 2021,²³ costing the Bangladesh economy between USD 67 billion and USD 114 billion in GDP (based on January 2021 estimates).

In May 2020, the MoE prepared a COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan²⁴ for primary and secondary education, which also identified learning loss, inequality of learning, an increase in dropout rates, etc. as some of the possible consequences of a long school closure. The report took into cognisance that only 44% of 5-11-year-old children in rural areas and 6% of children belonging to the poorest wealth quintile have a television at home. Similarly, only 3% of rural 5-11-year-old children and close to 0% in the poorest wealth quintile have a computer at home. Regarding the internet, only 30% of 5-11-year-olds in rural areas have internet access and just 7% in the poorest wealth quintile – generally, through mobile phones.

Another study conducted by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development at the beginning of the pandemic (June 2020) showed that “the study time at home actually went down from usual during

the school closure. This means the learning loss has been greater than what it should be because of the school closure.”²⁵ It also showed that only 25% of rural children with access to the television followed the classes. Use of the internet in learning was almost non-existent among the students surveyed.

The long interruption of in-person classes in the schools and the delivery of education through online means had some other serious socioeconomic consequences.

Many child rights advocates opined that tens of thousands of students across the country did not return to classes after the schools were reopened.²⁶ The majority, they say, are boys ages 12 and above, who during the interim were pushed into full-time work. This was also echoed by Tomoo Hozumi, UNICEF representative in Bangladesh, who stated in 2021: “With school closures in place since March 2020 and poverty levels rising amidst the pandemic, UNICEF is concerned that growing numbers of children are being pushed into child labour.”²⁷ This is happening because household incomes across the country plunged by an average of 23% during the first 18 months of the pandemic and families were using all means possible to survive.²⁸

This same reason also forced many families to arrange early marriage for their girl children, who otherwise could be going to school. One survey²⁹ conducted by the non-profit Manusher Jonno Foundation recorded almost 14,000 underage marriages across one-third of the country during the first six months of lockdown, with half of the girls aged 13 to 15.

In pre-pandemic times, in the 104 most poverty-prone areas in Bangladesh, the government with assistance from the World Food Programme (WFP) used to run different school feeding programmes to reach nearly three million children.³⁰ With the closure of the schools, the feeding programme also stopped, creating a further risk of poverty,

20 Amin, S., Hossain, M. I., & Ainul, S. (2021). *Learning Loss Among Adolescent Girls During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Rural Bangladesh*. Population Council. https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2021SBSR_LearningLossBangladesh.pdf

21 Ahmed, M. (2022, 13 February). Learning loss from Covid-19: Can a generational threat be averted? *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/recovering-covid-reinventing-our-future/blueprint-brighter-tomorrow/news/learning-loss-covid-19-2960811>

22 World Bank. (2021, 18 April). Keeping Bangladesh's Students Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2021/04/18/keeping-bangladesh-s-students-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>

23 Ibid.

24 Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. (2020). *COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan: Education Sector*. https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/bangladesh_moe_covid_19_response_and_recovery_plan.pdf

25 BRAC Institute of Governance and Development. (2020). *Coronavirus Outbreak, Schooling and Learning: Study on Secondary School Students in Bangladesh*. <https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/study/coronavirus-outbreak-schooling-and-learning-study-on-secondary-school-students-in-bangladesh>

26 Redfern, C., & Ahsan, A. (2022, 26 April). Tens of Thousands of Boys in Bangladesh Were Forced into Work During the Pandemic. Now School Is Resuming Without Them. *TIME*. <https://time.com/6170432/bangladesh-child-labor-pandemic/>

27 UNICEF Bangladesh. (2021, 11 June). Child labour rises to 160 million – first increase in two decades. <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/press-releases/child-labour-rises-160-million-first-increase-two-decades>

28 BRAC Institute of Governance and Development. (2022). *PPRC-BIGD COVID-19 Livelihoods & Recovery Panel Survey*. <https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/study/rapid-survey-on-immediate-economic-vulnerabilities-created-by-covid-19-and-the-coping-mechanisms-of-poor-and-marginal-people/>

29 Redfern, C., & Ahsan, A. (2022, 26 April). Op. cit.

30 Uddin, M. (2020, 13 June). Op. cit.

malnutrition and illness. Although the WFP later found a way around this by creating a take-home food rationing programme, not all children were covered or reached through this programme.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that online education due to the school closure created a learning divide, and had other socioeconomic consequences in Bangladesh, the hybrid model of education (i.e. a mix of online and offline education) is here to stay. The fact that Bangladesh could not ensure access to many rural and remote families does not mean that the idea of online education is to blame. However, Bangladesh was less prepared in terms of its delivery of infrastructure than it should have been.

The Master Plan for ICT in Education³¹ developed by the MoE has identified issues related to digital content development, introducing ICTs as a subject or topic in education, and the development of teaching-learning materials, but talks less about delivery mechanisms. Most of the infrastructure was centred around schools or teacher training institutes. Many schools have multimedia classrooms, and teachers could collaborate on, prepare and share digital content using the teachers' portal. But for a disaster like the lockdown, what was required was individual access to affordable devices and connectivity.

The National Broadband Policy 2009,³² updated in 2018, had a vision to connect all areas with high-speed broadband internet and provide broadband for all with affordable internet and devices. The pandemic has however exposed the reality of the access divide and the importance of the internet in the case of learning and education. Any new tariff structure for broadband should therefore keep in mind the needs and affordability of these tariffs for students.

In the context of Bangladesh, schools are not merely education institutes – they are local-level establishments that make broader socioeconomic contributions. The fact that school closure led to an increased drop-out rate, child labour, child marriage, malnutrition, etc. proves that the individual level of access to social services needs to be enhanced as much as access to education.

Action steps

Civil society in Bangladesh still does not have a total picture of the learning loss and possible long-term impact of online education due to the school closures. Research needs to be done by collating and reviewing disparate research pieces on the topic, by interviewing relevant stakeholders, and conducting a survey with the students and teachers directly affected by the closures.

Civil society also needs to see what policy interventions can be brought to address the needs of broadband connectivity, digital content, learning resources, and capacity building, among others. Policy advocacy could involve a campaign built on evidence-based research, including collecting best practices from other countries.

Policy options should explore the potential of broadband service providers and mobile phone companies creating separate tariff layers for students and for educational purposes, as well as the potential of government support or subsidies in this regard.

³¹ Ministry of Education. (2019). Op. cit.

³² <http://old.btrc.gov.bd/national-broadband-policy>

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

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2021-2022 Report
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