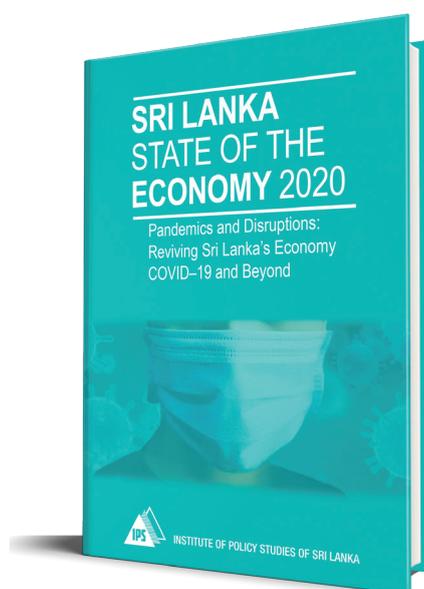




BUILDING A CRISIS-RESILIENT EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SRI LANKA

From the IPS flagship publication 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2020'



The COVID-19 pandemic has been recognised as the world's largest educational crisis, and interruptions to education can have long-term implications – especially for the more vulnerable – beyond mere losses in learning to increased dropout rates, loss of nutrition, and reductions in future earnings. Since closing schools and universities, governments have been adopting various modes of distance learning solutions, and grappling with multiple challenges, ranging from delivering content and supporting teachers to providing guidance to parents and addressing accessibility and connectivity issues. Nevertheless, every crisis also brings about opportunities for transformation, and past education crises have shown that it is possible to 'build back better'.

The fast-growing demand for education technology that was apparent even prior to COVID-19, has received a further

boost with the sudden shift to remote learning. This sudden shift has also led to speculations that COVID-19 has changed education systems for good, presenting both risks and opportunities for future education.

Risks

Widening education equity gaps

Recent survey data indicate that only 48% of Sri Lankan households with school-aged children owned a smartphone or computer – essential for online learning – at the start of 2019, and only 34% had an internet connection, a majority of whom are connected via mobile phones. Thus, less than half of all households in Sri Lanka can benefit from e-learning opportunities. Further, these are average figures, meaning that poorer, rural households are even worse-off. In addition, the fact that many students connect and learn via mobile phones – with only 15% and 4% of students having access to laptops and tabs, respectively – is concerning, given the difficulties associated with reading and absorbing content from a phone screen.

Threat to free public education

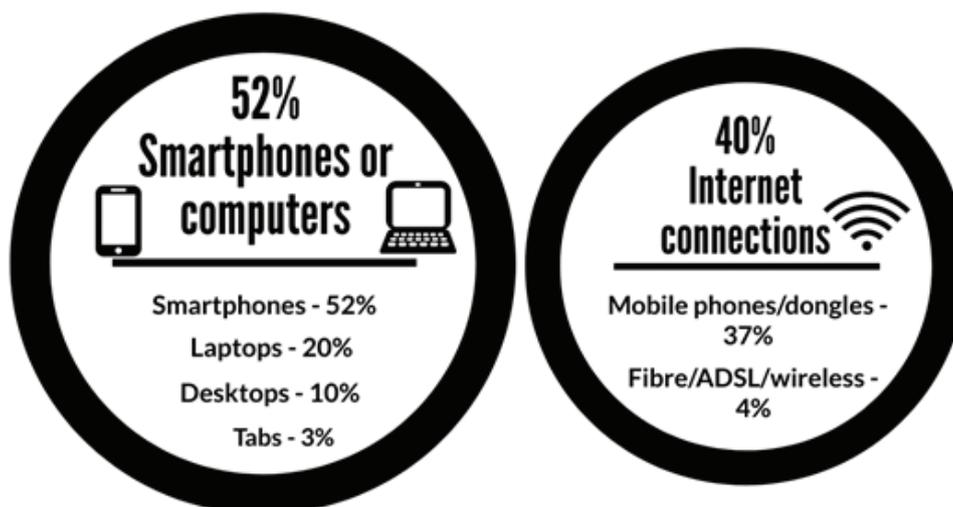
A related concern is the threat to free public education posed by an unprepared and rapid embracing of online learning, further commercialising education where the profit motive supersedes social transformation and equity motives. In the case of Sri Lanka, increasing dependence on private institutes for online educational activities can inten-

sify the pressure to open education to foreign investments, and further reduce government spending on education, which has stagnated at less than 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) over the years, compared to averages of 4% and 5% in middle-income and high-income countries, respectively. For instance, the growing use of online learning platforms can provide the government with a case to limit spending on education – particularly in areas such as physical infrastructure and human resources – placing the future of free education at greater risk.

Challenges in creating, maintaining, and improving distance learning

In Sri Lanka, e-learning in a majority of schools has been administered by means of teachers sending large volumes of lesson material as PDF documents to students using smartphones, via Whatsapp and Viber. This mechanism hasn't served much purpose, given that: (1) social media tools are not geared for transfer of bulk material; (2) students already have textbooks, making material sent on social media redundant; and (3) high expectations placed on parents in deciphering content received and instructing children. Of even greater concern is the reinforcement of teacher-centered education – a long-standing problem in Sri Lanka's education system – where students have limited room for developing independent and creative thinking, and problem-solving skills, instead having to absorb what is fed to them, now via social media platforms.

Household Availability of Devices and Internet Connections



Note: Percentage of households with children aged 5-18 years.
Source: LIRNEAsia (2020)

Opportunities

A changing education imperative

An optimistic view of potential educational transformations argues that COVID-19 has disrupted an education system that was already losing its relevance. COVID-19-stimulated online education can act as a catalyst to create new and more effective methods of teaching and learning, such as opportunities for teachers to engage in multiple methods of collaboration and professional development, and fostering independent student learning that can facilitate the acquisition of essential 21st century competencies. E-learning is one of the few areas that has continued to attract investments, presenting potential for rapid technological innovation. There is also the possibility of adopting 'blended learning' approaches, which can draw on the best of both worlds to create a richer learning experience.

Potential for building back better

Apart from technological innovations, there are other means and aspects through which education systems can emerge stronger from the COVID-19 crisis. First, this is an opportunity for other distance education modes, such as television and radio stations, to recognise the key role they play in supporting national education goals, which will hopefully motivate them to improve the quality of their programming.

Second, parental engagement in children's education will increase – research has shown that such engagement helps students perform better, especially those of low-income families where schools find it more difficult to build meaningful networks with parents.

Third, ministries of education will acquire a clear understanding of the gaps and challenges relating to using technology effectively, opening avenues to take necessary action. All of these factors, collectively, can significantly strengthen a country's education system.

Impetus to be better prepared for the future

The COVID-19 pandemic can also act as an incentive for education systems to be better prepared to handle future crises. The current challenges in distance learning encountered in many countries point to a crucial gap in school-based contingency planning – a management tool that aids in evaluating the impact of potential crises and ensuring appropriate provisions are in place to respond in a timely and effective manner.

Sri Lanka's education system was fully unprepared to transition seamlessly to distance learning when COVID-19 struck. Given the country's exposure to multiple crises over the years which have severely disrupted education, it should have been better prepared for another crisis. The present opportunity to do so cannot be missed.

Way Forward

Overcoming the learning crisis and responding effectively to the current pandemic involves some key challenges, including: (1) minimising the negative impact on learning; (2) building on opportunities offered by this experience to get back on a path of faster learning progress; and (3) developing more resilient education systems with contingency capacities to mitigate and manage future emergencies. The following steps can help Sri Lanka move forward in this direction:

- Re-adjust curricula and recover learning losses
- Safeguard education equity
- Develop a strong and resilient information system
- Enhance professional development of teachers
- Initiate and deepen collaborations
- Leverage the dividend in innovative capacity

This Policy Insight is based on the comprehensive chapter on "Building a Crisis-Resilient Education System in Sri Lanka" in the 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2020 report' - the flagship publication of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). The complete report can be purchased from the Publications Unit of the IPS.



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