DISCONNECTION AND DISPARITY

IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON EDUCATION IN NEPAL

Global Policy Project

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

School of Public Policy and Global Affairs

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Team Description

Boyd Hayes brings his experience working in development and civil society in South Africa, Senegal, and the USA, as well as his previous work and studies in journalism. Through his work, education, and upbringing, which included moving between different countries and cultural and linguistic contexts in North America and Africa, he honed his skills as a cross-cultural communicator and as a writer and problem solver. Boyd holds a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from the University of Kentucky, and he has completed a two-year term in the United States Peace Corps in northern Senegal. Through journalism and civil society, and now into policy making and research, Boyd brings a people-centred approach to his work, searching for insights and understanding in the lived experiences of individuals and communities, gleaned through formal and informal interactions and relationship-building.

Nabila Farid brings her previous experience with analysing educational policies in both rural and urban regions in Haiti to the team. She studied the impact of natural disasters and parent literacy rates on gender disparities in education. Nabila holds a Bachelor of Arts in Law and Society and Sociology from the University of Calgary, where she focused her studies on racial and ethnic discrimination in federal penitentiaries. Nabila's background, primarily consisting of experience working on post-secondary Indigenous policies and equity, diversity, and inclusion policies provides her with a unique lens to assess the ways in which access to education can be intersectional. She is primarily interested in immigration policies, corrections and the criminal justice system, and Indigenous self-governance policies.

Riya Sirkhell has worked extensively on child-protection policies in India with a broader professional focus on policy advocacy and research in South Asia on development issues ranging from public health, human trafficking, food security, among others. Most recently, she did an internship with UNESCO New Delhi (South Asia cluster office) where she worked on communication strategies to design and socialise campaigns on inclusive education. While completing her Bachelor's degree in Political Science at the University of Delhi, she was a Project Coordinator for a youth NGO working on improving public education in India through making the curriculum more engaging and improving learning outcomes, thereby reducing dropout rates. Her policy interests include gender equality and inclusive development.

Client Description

Open Learning Exchange Nepal (OLE Nepal) is a non-governmental organisation seeking to improve quality and access to education and learning in Nepal through the tailored design and provision of technology to students and teachers. Since its inception in 2007, OLE Nepal has sought to mitigate disparities in Nepal's education sector across geographic regions, school types, and population groups by introducing purpose-built hardware and software to classrooms and training teachers on how to incorporate it into their curricula. To date, OLE Nepal has provided technological support to schools in over 54 districts throughout Nepal, including over 1,000 urban and rural schools. To accomplish this, OLE Nepal has partnered with organisations and donors in the public, private, and non-profit sectors, both domestically and internationally, including Nepal Centre for Education and Human Resource Development, Government of Nepal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, World Food Program, AirAsia Foundation, and One Laptop Per Child. The following report supports OLE Nepal's current and anticipated initiatives, outlining major gaps in the current education delivery system with regards to technological access in remote regions and gender disparities, while providing opportunities for collaborations between OLE Nepal local governments, and schools.

Problem Statement and Rationale

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant delivery challenges to public education in Nepal, including limited technological integration as schools slowly re-open. Without a coordinated policy response across different levels of governance, already existing disparities in access to quality education across urban and rural settings, genders, and income-levels have been exacerbated.

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For over a decade, Open Learning Exchange Nepal (OLE Nepal) has worked towards the advancement of education in Nepal through the creation and delivery of innovative educational programs. These programs aim to improve students' access to education through prioritising ICT infrastructure and teacher training. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected education systems globally, leading to the near- worldwide closure of schools and rapidly requiring the shift to digital, remote education. With the priority of supporting an evolving education sector due to COVID-19, OLE Nepal continues to seek government support and partnerships. Due to the lack of consistent and emerging partnerships, it continues to face difficulties in the long-term implementation of its programming.

Produced by three Master of Public Policy and Global Affairs students at the University of British Columbia (UBC), this report analyses the factors that hinder access to primary education in both Nepal's urban and rural contexts (specifically the Districts of Lalitpur and Sindhupalchowk). This report presents primary data collected through a series of focus groups with key stakeholders like parents, teachers, and civil society members, as well as secondary data collected from academic literature and government reports. Our main findings include poor technological infrastructure to support remote education, lack of teacher-training to deliver online classes, low levels of student engagement in remote learning, disparate effects on girls and students living in remote areas with low levels of connectivity coupled with an uncoordinated policy response across various levels of government along with a dearth of accurate and accessible data on learning losses in different socio-economic groups. Finally, the report provides a set of recommendations addressed to both the central government (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology) and Open Learning Exchange that are designed to improve the implementation and evaluation of OLE Nepal's programming and ultimately help improve long-term education outcomes in Nepal. The analysis in this report is based on research conducted between the months of October 2020 and March 2021.

Our key recommendations are:

OLE Nepal:

- Create a **comprehensive online toolkit** with effective community teaching-learning strategies and activities for teachers.
- **Expand** the existing **teacher training program**.

- **Incorporate the engagement of parents and caregivers** in the teaching-learning process in OLE Nepal's programs.
- **Create engaging, text-based learning content for simple mobile phones** using minimal mobile data.

Government:

- **Enhance data collection** at federal, provincial and local levels of the governments to bring children back to school with lessons learned from the pandemic.
- Target **budget allocations** towards **strengthening ICT infrastructure** in public schools.

Stakeholder Voices: Overlapping and unique challenges

II. INTRODUCTION

Background: Nepal at a Glance

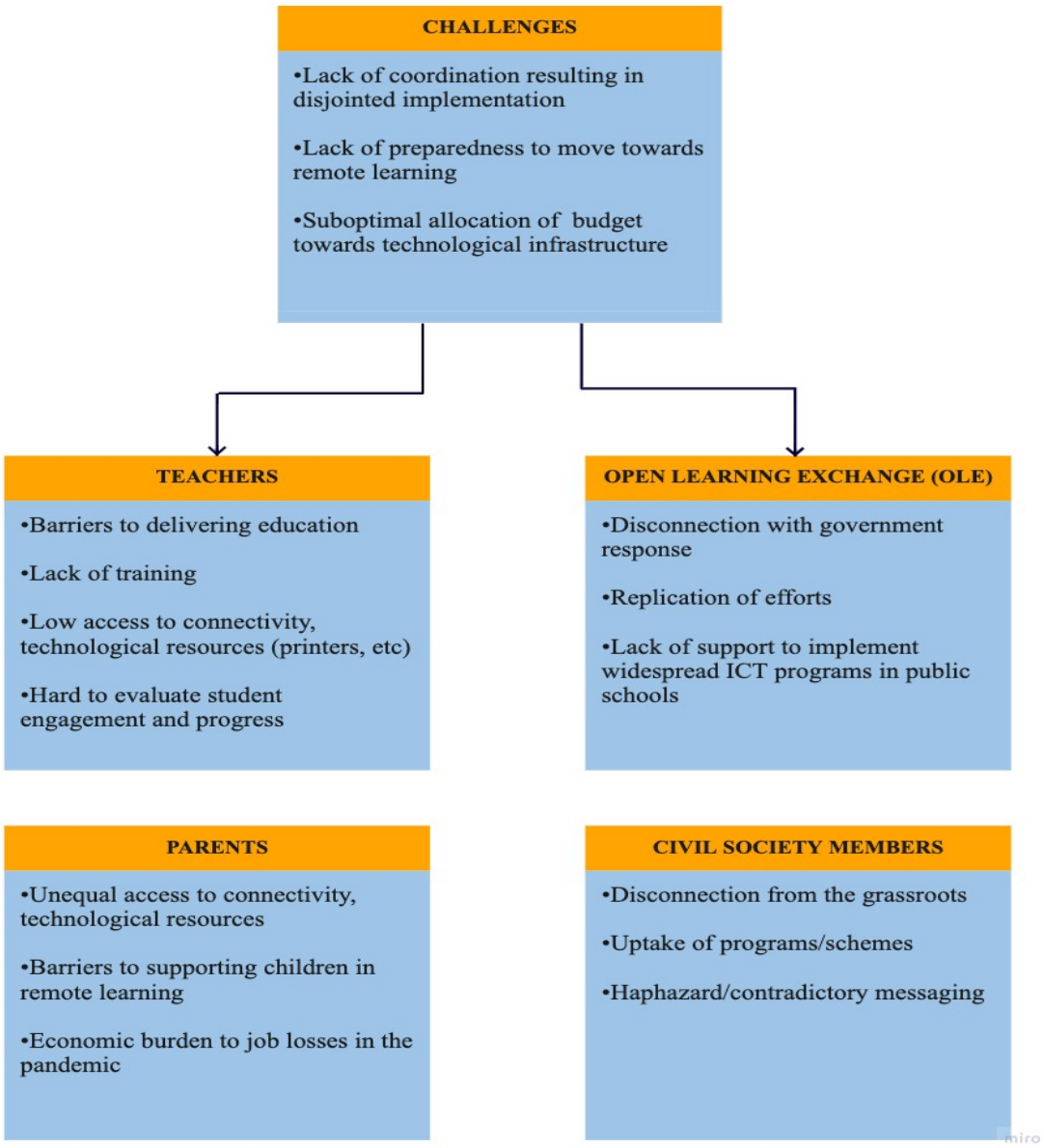

Figure 1: Primary challenges for continuing education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal as expressed by target stakeholder groups during virtual focus group discussions and interviews.

As of 2015, Nepal was classified as one of the least developed countries in Asia with a rank of 144 (out of 188) in UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI) (UNDP 2015). The unevenly developed country with a population of around 30 million boasts ethnic diversity with unparalleled socio-economic challenges, due to the inequitable distribution of resources both within and between urban and rural regions. More than a quarter of Nepali citizens are living below the poverty line[1] with particularly high rates of poverty among lower castes and those living in rural geographical regions (Subba et al. 2014).

In 2017, Nepal held its first local elections in twenty years. These were the first elections held under Nepal's new constitution, ratified in 2015, which transitioned the country from a unitary state to a Federal Democratic Republic. Following this transition, education policies became one of the more public and contentious policy responsibilities devolved from the federal level to local governments under the new constitution after the central government maintained tight control for most of Nepal's history.

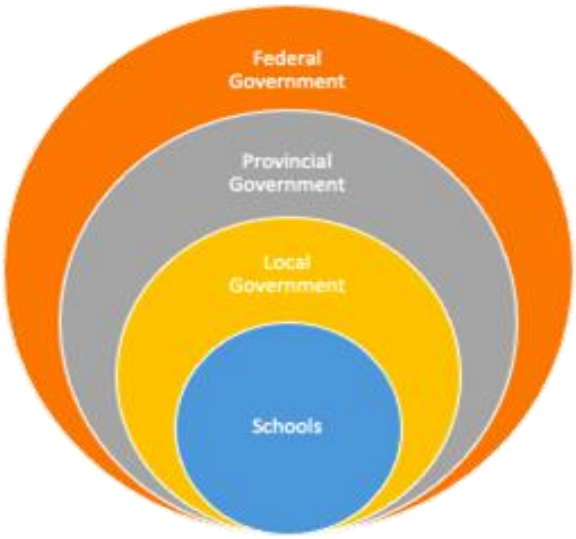

Figure 2: Nepal's current top-down governance structure.

However, the transfer of these powers has been slow due to poor coordination between levels of government and delays in policies passed by the national parliament (Shangraw 2019).

Natural Disasters and COVID-19

Encompassing the Himalayan range as well as the Tarai lowland plans adjoining India, Nepal is susceptible to natural disasters and adverse effects of climate change. The country was hit by two consecutive earthquakes in 2015, killing almost 9000 people and severely damaging parts of its infrastructure including houses, roads, schools. This catastrophic incident displaced thousands of families and pushed many people further into poverty. It had a debilitating effect on the education system as well, with more than 8000 public schools affected and more than 45,000 classrooms completely or partially destroyed. This led to major barriers for children enrolled in these schools to attend classes and made access to education for children from

[1] The poverty line defined by the government to the rupees per person a normal household will need to buy a normal basket of food that contains 2220 kcal per day, plus normal additional spending for a poor household. In terms of income, it requires NRs. 19,261, including NRs. 11,929 food poverty line and NRs. 7,332 non–food poverty. The poverty line varies by region depending on local prices.

vulnerable families even harder due to cancelled in-person classes, contributing to the existing disparities (Ezaki 2018).

Education in Nepal

The education system in Nepal is divided into two major levels consisting of basic schooling (grades 1-8) and secondary schooling (grades 9-12). There are three types of schools in Nepal including public, private and religious schools (funded primarily by religious institutions). With approximately 8 million students overall, over 5 million enrolled in government funded public schools. Nepal does not have a school catchment area system and children are allowed to choose their school and change it (Ezaki 2018).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) introduced the School Sector Reform Program (SSRP) to improve public schools by way of increasing enrollment and improving infrastructure in 2009. This was replaced by the School Sector Development Program (SSDP) in 2015 to focus on enhancing the overall quality of education with three key action areas, which:

1. Develop physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and moral potential for all children of 4-12 years of age by ensuring school readiness and access to quality basic education, and promoted life skills and value-based education

2. Prepare older students for employment by developing skilled human resources, and provided choices between technical and general secondary education, along with strengthening institutional links and facilitating a smoother transition to higher education

3. Enhance functional literacy and lifelong learning by cultivating reading and learning habits among young people and adults

Despite making significant strides in enrollment rates, Nepal still has a long way to go in terms of adequate learning outcomes for students. There exist wide gaps in quality of schools, teacher motivation and overall performance of students. For example, the latest federal government study on student assessment shows that only 28 percent of secondary students have adequate mathematical knowledge and almost 40 percent of younger students have limited knowledge of basic mathematical concepts and are unable to solve problems meant for their grade independently. 32 percent of the students reported not understanding what is being taught in the classroom and feeling left behind. Worryingly, over 70 percent of the students are below the level of competencies expected by the curriculum.

The country went into lockdown in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, after which all schools were closed to limit the spread of COVID-19. Many schools began being used as quarantine centers with teachers migrating back to their hometowns. This resulted in a national emergency where formal education for more than 8 million children stopped overnight. The federal, provincial and local governments did not take any clear decisions regarding the continuation of education in the face of school closures. As a result, many ad-hoc arrangements were made by local authorities, school management committees, teachers and parents to ensure student learning continued. However, these could not be formalised or assessed due to the expedient and temporary nature of these initiatives.

The government response to the impact of the pandemic in education delivery was seen through the expansion of international funding, particularly by the World Bank on a new project called COVID-19 School Sector Reform Project. This project included three main components including the creation of distance learning materials with a focus on children with disabilities (CwD), supporting federal and sub-national governments with school re-opening, and evaluation of distance-learning techniques. 85 percent of the budgets were allocated to supporting governments for safe school re-opening and other program components focused on the distribution of learning packages, creation of audio-visual resources to be aired on TV or radio, educating teachers, parents and caregivers (Government of Nepal 2020).

As of November 2020, the federal government has announced that local governments can decide to reopen or keep the schools closed based on the assessment of the risks involved around COVID-19. Schools which were used as quarantine centers during earlier months of the pandemic have been directed to ensure implementation of standard public health security protocols recommended by the Ministry of Health, including disinfection of the schools, before reopening the schools.

Local governments are free to decide on running the schools in different formats depending on the local situation, such as conducting all the classes in the school at the same time as in normal situation, or running shift-based classes at different times for different levels/grades, or conducting classes only few days in a week, or only a few hours in a day etc.

The following report outlines major themes that were observed through remote stakeholder consultations, focus groups, and a general literature review. These qualitative research findings have helped shape our policy recommendations for OLE Nepal to mitigate learning losses from the pandemic and will better inform our client's advocacy on improving children's access to ICT schooling infrastructure.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

The national lockdown resulting from the pandemic posed a multi-faceted crisis to the education sector in Nepal due to low levels of connectivity and technological access making it difficult to switch to remote learning. Despite schools slowly reopening now, there have been large learning losses and possibly dropout rates among girls and students from low-income families and remote locations. Due to the rapidly evolving nature of the situation, the OLE-UBC team decided to employ qualitative research methods since the full impact COVID-19 on education still remains to be seen. With very minimal quantitative data available on actual indicators, the team decided to understand these impacts through stakeholder consultation. All of the fieldwork was conducted remotely, using Zoom software due to the travel restrictions posed by COVID-19. We supported our primary research findings with an analysis of available government data on attendance and enrollment, specifically through a gender-based comparison.

Our initial research design was a comparative case-study between a rural and urban school in Sindhupalchowk and Lalitpur respectively to understand the disparate effects of the pandemic on education delivery. However, due to the remote nature of fieldwork, there were limitations of accessibility and connectivity to reach stakeholders based in remote locations. Hence, we adjusted our research design to a general stakeholder consultation with the government, parents, teachers, civil society and technical experts.

To this end, we conducted mixed-methods research through in-depth interviews with education experts, multilateral representatives, educators along with four focus group discussions (FGDs) with local government officials, parents, teachers, civil society members living in Nepal. Separate consultations were also conducted with government officials from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST), the World Bank, and academics with an area of expertise in the Nepali education system.

Research Questions

- What were the main challenges faced by parents, teachers and the government in responding to the COVID-19 crisis with respect to education?
- How have social cleavages such as rural-urban and male-female disparities been affected due to the lockdown and school closures?
- What are the key learnings from COVID-19 response to public education and how can the system be strengthened?

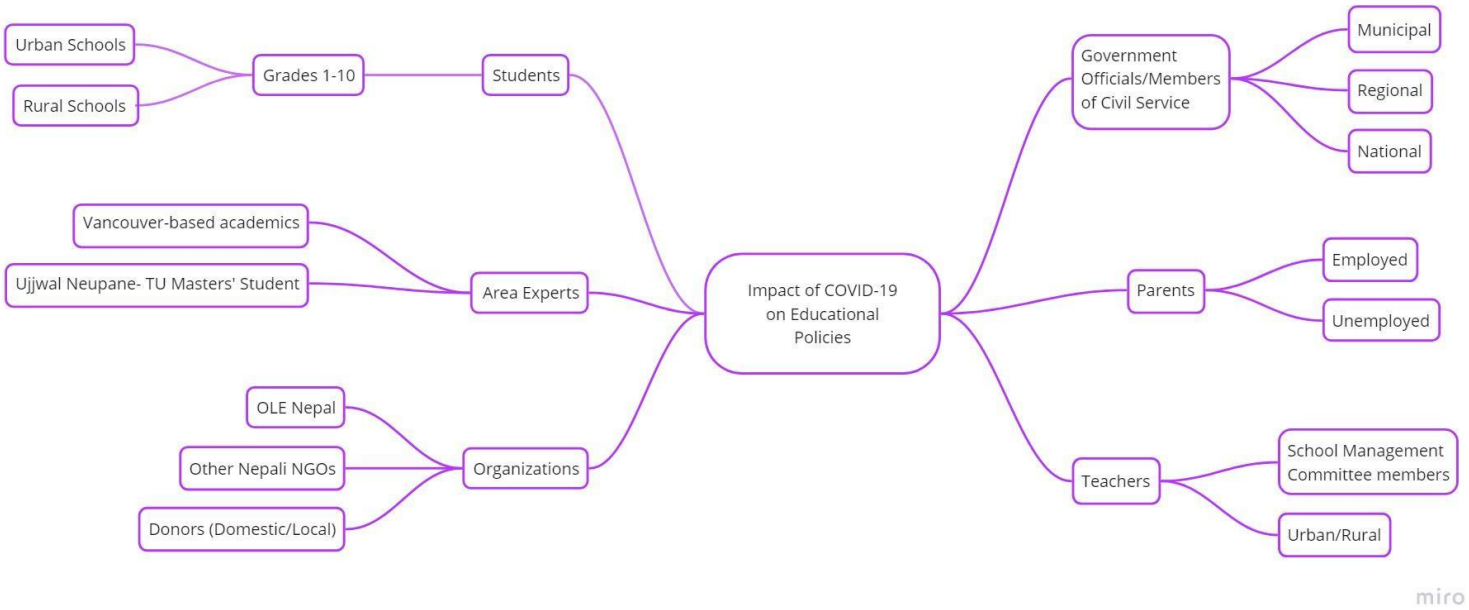

Figure 3: A snapshot of the project's target stakeholder groups. Although the research team did not engage directly with students, they are considered an important stakeholder as they are impacted most by education policies. Although this project's scope was narrow, the research team wanted to ensure adequate representation of stakeholders in order to produce actionable, holistic recommendations.

IV. COVID-19 RESPONSE TO EDUCATION: ANALYSIS & THEMES

This section details the various themes that emerged from the primary and secondary research on how different stakeholder groups including government, teachers, parents and civil society--are responding to the educational crisis caused by school closures in addition to existing disparities. This provides useful context to understanding the importance of mitigating learning losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

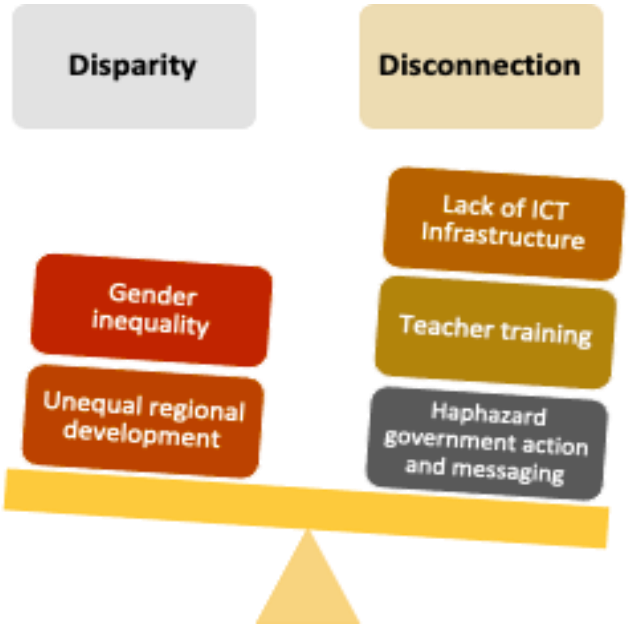

Figure 4: Link between educational disparities and disconnection due to poor infrastructure, with disconnection further exacerbating the existing disparities.

Digital Divide

In Nepal's context, digital inequality has been seen as a problem that can be resolved by increasing access, but many residents do not have adequate access to updated ICT infrastructure. Non-smartphones make up 68 percent of the mobile phones in Nepal, according to a 2014 survey conducted by Martin Chautari (Pandey 2018). With unprecedented e-learning initiatives through the 2020 'Student Learning Facilitation Guideline,' the central government aimed to ensure the longevity of alternate learning through operations using electronic devices like radios, televisions, and cell phones, yet limited access remains a stubborn issue. The MoEST's learning portal, which features digital content like interactive learning games, videos of classroom lessons, audio, and e-books is overseen by Nepal's Curriculum Development Center. However, in rural provinces like the Bagmati Province only 30 percent of students have access to the internet, and only 12 out of 600 school students have cell phones (Nepali Sansar, 2020).

With regards to internet connectivity, most schools are lacking, as noted in the 2019-20 Economic Survey (Ministry of Finance 2020), which reported that only 12 percent of public schools have the capacity to offer information and communication technology (ICT) based learning. Even for those who are considered to have internet access, Pandey and Chautari's report (2018) indicates that many of those who use the internet in Nepal are on simple, non-smartphone mobile devices using minimal mobile data. Rather than being 'haves' with comprehensive internet access, or 'have-nots' with no access at all, Chautari calls this group the

'have-less,' and the limitations they face in accessing the internet also pose barriers to remote education. To address the critical learning gap faced by children due to the limited internet access, a coalition of teachers, education journalists, nongovernmental organisations, local governments, and local radio stations has also launched a distance-learning radio program called 'Radio Schools' (Radhakrishnan-Nair et al. 2020).

OLE Nepal's approach has included distributing computers and interactive learning software to schools throughout Nepal, as well as providing training for teachers to best utilise these tools. Through a rapid collaboration with Nepal's MoEST in March 2020, OLE Nepal worked to make educational content available with free and open access for all learners through the Ministry's online education portal. Despite such efforts, serious obstacles remain for Nepal's public education system and more support is required; not least of these is the poor coordination between decision makers at different levels of government.

During focus group discussions with civil society members, the lack of basic infrastructure such as access to electricity, network coverage, and internet connectivity, especially in remote areas, was highlighted as one of the major barriers to online learning. The focus group discussions with teachers also indicated that schools in urban areas were willing to provide students with many resources, except for arguably the most important resource during this time: access to the internet.

In the same vein, parents of Nepali school children identified that low access to reliable electricity, affordable internet, and access to internet-capable devices were major barriers for them in helping their children continue education remotely. Every parent mentioned these concerns, either for themselves or for other parents in nearby communities. As one mother of a 6-year-old primary school student noted:

> "In the remote areas, still some students don't get the information, some have not even attended the online classes because of no access to electricity, shortage of money to purchase devices, no internet and inability of parents' to support their education, because in the remote areas, the parents could not understand. This is the problem we are facing as parents."

Even where electricity and internet connection are available, however, parents report that the utilities are unreliable, with slow and frequently dropped internet connections and regular power outages.

One father suggested that if online learning is a priority, Nepali authorities should at least ensure that electricity is available during school hours: "We have regular electricity problems here, so

the government should provide regular electricity. Even if it is specifically just for learning times, like in the morning and the afternoon for some hours."

Learning Quality Not Limited to Devices

Regarding devices, the parents present in the focus group each noted that their children had the necessary devices, but that other families may not have them. However, as will be discussed shortly, even when devices are present, learning is often impeded by a number of other factors, including geographical location, gender disparities, and the level of education possessed by parents.

Concerns with Remote Learning and Human Capital Investment

Teachers in public schools of Nepal are often undercompensated and have low levels of familiarity in integrating technology into education. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented challenges in teaching. When physical classes were suddenly stopped, it was difficult for teachers to adapt to the new circumstances. Discussions with civil society members and educators reveal that teachers tried to replicate lessons they would have held in person online which wasn't efficient. Insufficient investments in human capital to teach online combined with a general paucity of technological access resulted in limited options in teaching and learning processes.

FGDs with teachers revealed their need to quickly adapt to emerging teaching-learning tools and technology like Zoom and Google Classroom, resulting in teaching delays and student confusion. According to various teachers, this pandemic has demonstrated that many schools are operating with outdated ICT infrastructure. In September 2019, a training session on alternative teaching methods like delivering lessons through online mediums, radio, and television was attended by 155 teachers from various regions around Nepal (UNESCO 2020). Teachers who have access to the internet have had the flexibility to work from home, yet some have expressed the frustration of having to go to the school in order to use printing services. Similarly, parents must go to schools to collect and submit assignments on behalf of children in some urban schools. Although the training only reached about 0.2 percent of Nepal's teachers, participants felt profound benefits in improving the quality of their teaching. However, they suggested that parents should also be equipped to support their children with remote learning.

Stakeholder consultations reveal that most of the funds earned from student fees attending public school and government budgets for education are directed towards teacher salaries. This indicates a gap in allocation of resources towards building better infrastructure for student learning and education delivery along with little to no financial commitment from the government to improve the quality of public education and teacher training.

Additionally, the pandemic posed new challenges to delivering quality education as students displayed different learning styles in the new context. Teachers were tasked with the complex task of creating engaging materials to continue learning through the pandemic. However, this fared differently for different age-groups—on average, it was harder for younger children to maintain focused attention for long periods of time as compared to older students in secondary school.

These challenges persist in a unique way with parents. Parents noted that, especially with young children, their presence was necessary to help facilitate their children's learning at home. However, Nepali parents are often unfamiliar with the devices and the media used for online learning. While most parents recognised this as a challenge, a mother of a 6-year-old boy, who is herself studying for a post-secondary degree in Hospitality, sees opportunity:

> Most of the parents in Nepal are not educated and used to these internet devices. Some of the parents can learn to use these devices. But without using these devices, they cannot help their children. And for young children, parents need to sit with them when they are learning. So this is actually a chance for the parents to learn. Before they might not have had the interest to learn, because they are very rushed for time, but now they can learn with their children.

To aid this learning, some focus group participants said there was a need for "technical support orientation classes" for parents of students. The adjustment to the increased use of technology without reliable infrastructure has proven to be challenging for many, especially parents who have inevitably struggled to contribute to their children's educational advancement. However, the pandemic has affirmed the importance of involving parents and caregivers in childhood learning and education.

Poor Student Engagement

Discussions with teachers also revealed a link between remote learning and poor levels of student engagement. Students of urban regions have been learning remotely for almost 12 months, resulting in both psychological and physical obstacles to their learning. Rural schools took a tailored approach to mitigate the psychological and physical obstacles, as some schools collaborated with local organisations to launch several programs as a direct opportunity for teachers to connect with students. One of the programs places students in groups of ten, who are then contacted by teachers to ask about their daily activities, mental health related to the pandemic, and their level of comfort with remote learning. Other rural schools began operating in-person classes three months ago, following the direction of the central government, due to the no internet access at many children's homes. A school which typically hosts 300 students operated on a reduced capacity of 50-75 students per day, for only two hours of instruction. This

provided students with a chance to receive supervised education, which they would typically not receive in their homes due to their parents working labour-intensive jobs.

Parents of students in FGDs further supported the teachers' claims that students are not engaging with remote learning. All parents in the focus group noted that the online set-up was not well suited to their children's needs, resulting in the students' lack of focus. Most parents had children just beginning primary school, around 6 years of age, and they emphasized that the online delivery was too reading- and writing-intensive for their young children to fully engage with and comprehend. One mother noted, "In my opinion, small children are not mentally or physically capable of learning well online." Another parent added, "They are more prepared for playing games and learning through games. They struggle to focus because it is not engaging enough." These explanations by parents present a two-fold concern, the worry that their children are not receiving an education of high quality, and the frustration associated with the added stress they are now facing on top of their daily commitments. Participants in both parent and teacher focus groups seemed eager to voice their frustrations, and many of their comments were echoed or paralleled across the group.

Limitations to Learning Evaluation

Throughout the research team's discussions with teachers, there was an emphasis on the importance of student evaluation processes in education delivery. Due to remote learning, the only way to currently evaluate students is through online examinations, which is deemed ineffective by teachers. In preparation for these online examinations, students must rely on parental support and supervision. In many rural regions of Nepal, parents did not attend school themselves and cannot teach their children the subject matter specified in the curriculum; a connection must be established with students' daily activities and their curriculums. Teachers expressed deep frustration in their focus group responses, many of which were shared, as they spoke about the lack of preparation they faced in evaluating students. Additionally, grade advancement and final grades are now established based on pre-board examination results, instead of the regular board examination which takes place later in the year. Utilising the pre-board results cannot accurately reflect the effort and progress of students, as they are often unprepared and have not studied the entire curriculum.

A similar decision was announced by the Ministry of Education in Bangladesh, where 1.4 million students who were set to take the equivalent of a board exam, the "Higher Secondary Certificate" (HSC) in 2020 were instead evaluated based on their results from two of their previous public examinations instead (XinhuaNet 2020). All HSC exams were cancelled with no potential reinstatement date announced. Another one of Nepal's neighbors, India, also had to reconsider the traditional mechanisms usually used to evaluate students. Central Board of

Secretary Education, Anurag Tripathi, indicated that "shifting students away from knowledge-based education to competency and skill-based learning is essential" in enhancing student learning (Sharma 2020). The Indian Ministry of Education had previously issued an order for all final board exams for grades 10 to 12 to continue using a modified schedule, but as COVID-19 cases continue to increase in states like Punjab, the state education department decided to postpone the Punjab board exams to a further date. Both these countries utilised earlier student evaluations to calculate their grades.

Lack of Accurate and Accessible Data

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant learning losses, however, quantifying these outcomes have been challenging for Nepal, as tracking and assessing students has remained an elusive goal. The uncoordinated government responses and arbitrary learning setups have resulted in changed learning outcomes, enrolment rates, dropout rates. Data collection for these changes have not been documented adequately due to the crisis and low political priority, especially as a factional conflict within the ruling National Communist Party has driven the government into a constitutional crisis regarding the dissolution of parliament and the holding of elections.

A UNICEF (2020) child and family survey (updated and released monthly throughout the pandemic) revealed that at the outset of the pandemic response in Nepal, children in 52 percent of households were forced to stop studying altogether, while as many as 93 percent of the children who were able to continue studies have faced various difficulties with learning remotely at the time of the survey. In another nationwide survey conducted by the National Campaign for Education, students reported that virtual learning was ineffective for 64.3 percent of them pointing to challenges in remote education (Ghimire 2020). While these surveys have touched on schooling, they have failed to address some of the more focused questions around education during the pandemic in a detailed and insightful way.

These data points however are not sufficient to address the contextual challenges faced by students in different circumstances. There is a need to fill in the gaps by quantifying schools which weren't able to conduct remote classes, learning losses amongst students in different socio-economic groups, changes in net-enrolment and drop-out rates to understand the key challenges faced by teachers and students to assess feasible solutions.

Gendered Burdens of Household Work

Despite making significant strides in gender parity and school enrolment for girls, drop-out rates especially in upper classes remain high. By the time girls reach the senior secondary school (grade 11), over 80 percent are already out of school (Paudel 2019). This can be attributed to

living in poorly connected remote districts, child marriage, gender-based violence and poor socio-economic status (Sharma 2019). Nepal also has one of the highest prevalence of child marriage, globally at 40 percent (Girls Not Brides 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic has made matters worse for women and girls, who are disproportionately affected due to school closures and national lockdowns. They are at a higher risk of witnessing exploitation, violence, and abuse at home. Anecdotal evidence suggests a steep spike in cases of child sexual assaults wherein 48 complaints were registered in the first six weeks of lockdown, which is very high compared to a total of 211 cases in the whole of last year. Majority of the perpetrators are relatives or close associates indicating that home isn't always a safe place for women and young girls (Khanal et. al 2020). A recent survey by the British agency Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) found 11 out of 152 girls had been married in the four districts during the 3 months of lockdown, which represented a clear increase over a short period in certain locales (Grant 2020). With sudden job losses and increasing poverty, parents are more likely to arrange marriages for their daughters soon to reduce the economic burden. The global recession coupled with disruption in ongoing programs and interventions focused on preventing child marriages will likely result in a sharp increase in child marriages in the future (Khanal et al. 2020).

In our primary research, we identified two specific gendered burdens regarding online learning for young girls and mothers: 1) the expectation that girls will begin taking responsibility for household work at a young age, and 2) the need for specifically mothers to help their children with their online schooling while fathers work. Most participants spoke candidly about the culturally informed gender expectations for girls and women.

When asked whether they had needed their children's help in maintaining the household during the pandemic, all parents initially stated that their children were either too young to help, or that they helped, but not during school hours. However, after one father recalled that while his 6-year-old son does not help, his 20-year-old daughter is often asked to help with cooking and cleaning, other parents began to chime in with examples of differences between expectations for children of different genders. Another participant attributed the different expectations to cultural norms:

> Nepal is a patriarchal society, so males and boys, like other countries, are always busy with their own games and sports. But we think girls must know how to cook food, clean the house, and wash clothes. In Nepali culture, girls start helping their mothers from an early age of 7- or 8-years-old. But boys are expected to play and focus on studies, I don't get any support from boys.

In response, one mother noted that though there may be a need for change, she did not think it could happen "quickly or easily." She added, "This is the culture, so we have to deal with it." Participants did not elaborate as to whether these expectations had a significant impact on the academic performance of girls during the pandemic, but media reports in Nepal suggest that in the absence of reliable schooling, young girls are getting married at higher rates than usual (Grant 2020; Logan and Maharjan 2020). Further data suggests that Nepali women and girls are at much greater risk for suffering from domestic violence during the ongoing pandemic (Dahal et al. 2020). While conclusive data regarding the academic performance of Nepali girls during the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet widely available, anecdotal evidence suggests that girls and women bear disparate gendered burdens in this specific context, and academic performance could conceivably be impacted.

Government Response

Around 8.2 million students in Nepal faced disruptions in their education and learning due to school closures from the COVID-19 pandemic (Sherpa et al. 2020). While international aid efforts like the SSDP have aimed to improve the quality, equitable access, and efficiency of basic and secondary education in Nepal through a collaborative approach, many policy analysts argue that community ownership is the only solution to the systemic challenges of Nepal's schooling system (World Bank, 2003, 4). A community ownership solution emphasizes the need for improved local accountability, which can only be addressed by new partnerships between communities and their schools. These new partnerships will have to address geographical difficulties (including three vastly different ecological zones) and ethnic diversity to support state-building projects such as schooling (Carney, 2009).

Reliance on Foreign Aid

Foreign aid for education has been incoming since the 1980s with significant funding for all major national educational programs. The most recently completed School Sector Reform Plan (2009–2015), received US $624 million over 5 years (Karkee and Comfort 2017). The ongoing School Sector Development Program (SSDP), which was signed in September 2020, has a budget allocation of US $10.85 billion until 2023 (Government of Nepal 2016). This shows that the international community has been involved in Nepal's education policy for decades. Nepal is an aid-dependent nation with foreign funding from governments, multilaterals, international NGOs referred to as external development partners (EDP). These EDPs have a heavy influence on policy making in various sectors as they work closely with governments in designing and implementing policies (Karkee and Comfort 2017). The additional grant from the specific COVID-19 funds will contribute to the implementation of the MoEST's COVID-19 contingency plan to mitigate and

respond to the potential impacts of the pandemic on the education sector (Government of Nepal 2020).

While enrollment and gender parity witnessed significant hikes due to increased number of school buildings, there remain severe structural gaps. The quality of education hasn't improved much with a much lower percentage of students passing the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam, now known as the Secondary Education Exam (SEE) in public schools as compared to private ones. Retention rates for girls in school remain poor along with high prevalence of child marriage as highlighted above. This points towards a larger gap of inadequate infrastructure in public schools and capacity-building among educators to deliver learning materials effectively.

School Closures in Nepal: Uncoordinated Government Action and Messaging

Nepal went into a national lockdown in March 2020 following which all schools were closed to limit the spread of COVID-19. This began a string of contradictory government guidelines and orders for parents/caregivers, teachers, civil society members, and students. The general lack of direction from the federal government resulted in unsustainable ad-hoc measures by local governments that have contributed to a non-cohesive policy response to continue education in the context of COVID-19. The government has been working with international agencies such as World Bank, UNICEF, among others on the School Sector Development Program (SSDP). However, these efforts remain disconnected from the grassroots wherein parents, teachers, and students struggle to teach and learn in these challenging circumstances. The provincial and local governments have not coordinated with grassroots NGOs and organisations to provide learning kits, teacher training, psycho-social counseling, or other support measures effectively, resulting in replication of efforts, and poor communication between various channels making efforts to help children continue learning.

The federal government issued a guideline in November 2020 giving discretionary powers to local governments to reopen schools or keep them closed as per contextual circumstances. This has resulted in an uneven opening of public schools in some areas, whereas private schools and some public schools in cities still remain closed. Currently, some students have started returning to schools with lowered capacity, hours while many others continue to learn from home.

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic created coordination and communication barriers for governments globally, including in wealthier nations with longer-established federal systems than Nepal's. During focus group discussions parents, teachers, civil society members echoed a deep frustration towards the government's unclear and often contradictory messaging towards educational directives during the pandemic. At the beginning, local governments did not provide them with timely messaging on school closures or online learning. This resulted in some schools shifting to online learning weeks before other schools, due to varying municipal decisions and

unclear central directives. However, according to participants, once online learning was officially launched in all urban schools, messaging related to the online curriculum was clear. Teachers were told that they did not have to finish 100 percent of the course content, and that they could operate four to six classes per day instead of the usual eight. Additionally, in collaboration with UNICEF, the MoEST prepared a new curriculum and learning materials that are unique to pandemic learning. Leading up to the reopening of some schools, some teachers expressed that the local government has allowed in-person classes to resume with precautions but did not indicate what these exact precautions would be. COVID-19 crisis management committees had to be formed by both teachers and parents in order to address this situation and establish a response.

Parents voiced similar concerns. Not only did they find the mixed messaging from different levels of government to be confusing regarding whether schools were opening or remaining closed, but they said the unclear and confusing information from local government had led them to miss out on alternative learning programs. The father of a boy just beginning school said, “We missed online classes for one month because we did not have the right information. Most parents didn’t get the right information, so nobody started from the beginning.” Others noted that when they and other parents went to their local schools and municipalities with questions and concerns regarding education during the pandemic, they were unable to get answers.

The lack of clear communication from the government has led to concerns that schools will open prematurely, possibly even if the risk of contracting COVID-19 remains high. While one parent noted that his municipality was already commencing plans to open schools while maintaining hand washing and physical distancing (in December 2020), others voiced concerns that it was too early.

> The Nepal government did a lot for us early in the pandemic, like total lockdown. But now with cases rising, I think they ignore the problems like local citizens. Local people nowadays also ignore the increasing cases, people focus on having an easy lifestyle. Recently I think we are more vulnerable than before, because I think now we should focus on how we take care of our health as the first priority. That is my perspective.

Many of the general sentiments expressed in the focus group with parents demonstrated the level of frustration associated with supporting their children’s learning. This was due to the inconvenience of managing their ordinary work life with supporting their children’s learning. The concern that the COVID-19 virus may still pose too great a threat for children to return to school in person led one father in the focus group to suggest that he may wait another year before sending his 6-year-old son back to school. While the threat level posed by the virus in

Nepal in 2021 is evolving, and more schools are beginning to open throughout the country, the focus group responses suggest that there remains trepidation amongst parents considering sending their children to school.

V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This section details various policy alternatives that emerged from the primary and secondary research to minimise learning losses for school-going students caused by COVID-19 and strengthening Nepal's public schooling system to improve learning outcomes among children and youth.

The recommendations are divided into two sections, with the first section being focused on OLE Nepal-specific programs and the second one focuses on the broader advocacy priorities of OLE Nepal as a thought leader in Nepal's education policy.

Programmatic Recommendations for OLE Nepal

- **Create a comprehensive online toolkit with effective community teaching-learning strategies and activities for teachers.**

Combining success stories of effective teaching methods during school closures and OLE Nepal's innovative learning tools such as Digital Early Grade Reading (EGR), Game Development, etc. and compiling them into a comprehensive resource with best practices and learning tools for enhanced learning outcomes with a focus on applied learning. This can be designed as a brochure with situational examples of how to apply different teaching-learning strategies and tools.

Short term goal: This can serve as a toolkit for public school teachers to employ engaging teaching and learning methods

Long term goal: This can be presented as evidence for the need to revise the national curricula to a more application-based teaching format.

- **Expand the existing teacher training program to include virtual options**

Updating the existing teacher training program based on the new circumstances of physical distancing posed by COVID-19 by making it a virtual training session. Incorporate effective teaching strategies from successful community learning methods during school closures. Focus on active outreach for greater uptake of the training program by the hardest-hit schools and

locations for capacity-building among educators. Maintain an offline version of the training program for educators who do not possess adequate technological resources to access it virtually. Deliver the program in-person for such schools and locations as and when they open up and it is safe to do so. This program can be monitored at a bi-annual basis, and its implications can include increased student engagement, which may be monitored through parent-teacher interviews, student grades, and questions asked to children about their overall well-being and performance. In the long-term, this type of program can help prepare teachers for any extenuating circumstances that may arise, including natural disasters (which have recently affected the school closures in Nepal).

- **Incorporate the engagement of parents and caregivers into the teaching-learning process in OLE Nepal's programs.**

The pandemic has affirmed the importance of parents and caregivers in childhood learning and education. However, parents and caregivers face significant knowledge gaps and resources to help their children with school. Hence, we recommend running an information campaign for parents and caregivers in OLE Nepal's focus regions, providing the tips and resources (such as the one recommended above), to support their children with navigating technology-based learning. This can be done through the dissemination of an infographic or a short video (to be circulated via Facebook).

- **Create engaging, text-based learning content for simple mobile phones using minimal mobile data.**

While the case of internet connectivity in Nepal may be less so a case of 'haves' and 'have-nots,' but rather a case of the 'have less' accessing the internet on simple mobile phones using relatively small and cheap amounts of mobile data, creative learning content that can be accessed on these simple devices must be created. Where smartphone and laptop usage may be sparse in some regions, simple phones and text-based internet interactions are more prevalent, and with some creativity, students and parents can both be reached in that space for the purpose of remote education. This could even be achieved by partnering with mobile providers to subsidize access to learning materials, so users can continue to spend within their relatively small mobile data budgets.

Policy Advocacy Recommendations

- **Enhance data collection at federal, provincial and local levels of the governments to bring children back to school with lessons learned from the pandemic.**

The overall education strategy should focus on creating a resilient plan built-in with adaptability strategies for future shocks specifically by integrating ICT with education delivery. Despite the increased numbers of school enrollment rates, learning outcomes and access to education have not improved. The pandemic has worsened any pre-existing disparities in the education system, so updated data collection will support resolutions to these challenges. As the back-to-school plan continues to evolve, efficient data collection by the government is required to inform decisions to improve prevalent gaps, such as gender disparities, rural-urban divides, and other barriers to education. With this data, future plans for the SSDP can be supported to prioritize a student-first approach.

- **Target budget allocations towards strengthening ICT infrastructure in schools.**

There has been little to no resource allocation on improving connectivity or access to technological resources for students learning remotely during the pandemic. Allocating targeted budgets to improve ICT infrastructure in schools and remote areas, teacher-training in using digital resources in education and computer literacy among students will equip them to learn more effectively and be better prepared for future shocks.

VI. APPENDIX

Research Methodology

The purpose of the focus groups was to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on education on different stakeholder groups in Nepal. Specifically, the questions aimed to discern the level of support, main challenges and opportunities they have experienced. We delved into the response to the pandemic by relevant government departments, school administration, teachers and parents, student receptivity to remote learning; socio-economic and gender disparities that were aggravated during the pandemic; and general sentiments on the process of reopening schools. These focus groups lasted for one hour, and included between six to nine participants, alongside our team and research assistant. Participants received a Nepali-translated questionnaire ahead of our meeting.

The purpose of the interviews and consultations was to engage with subject matter experts to better understand the history of the education system, pre-existing gender disparities, and how varying educational infrastructure in urban and rural regions affects students' abilities to access remote education. Discussions on attendance, enrollment, and student advancement between grades also took place to assess how the student evaluation process has changed due to the pandemic. To complement these primary modes of data gathering, a literature review was also conducted to observe best practices in the South Asian region related to the ways educational policies have been reformed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The collection of both qualitative and quantitative data has provided us with useful themes to understand the rapidly evolving situation in the Nepali education sector. Despite our success to collect data from various stakeholders, the team faced some limitations throughout the data collection stage. Nepal's time zone is 13 hours and 45 minutes ahead of the Pacific Standard Time (PST) time zone, which presented some scheduling challenges. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted our ability to reach more stakeholders, and only allowed us to connect with stakeholders virtually, which possibly limited our ability to pick up on any participant body language throughout the focus group process. Conducting virtual meetings also meant being unable to reach vulnerable, hard-to-reach populations due to the low-levels of internet accessibility in Nepal. This is particularly true for remote regions and low-income families where connectivity and availability of internet and technological devices isn't widespread. Hence, our fieldwork consisted of stakeholder consultations with only those who were able and willing to participate in our project.

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