The digital divide, education, and marginalized youth

Our society has already been divided in many ways – by caste, class, race, sex, gender, and ethnicity, to name a few. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore and deepened another divide – that of technology. People with the privilege of technology access can search and find anything in one-click, but others who do not have this magic wand are left out of the game. In the physical world, people who have fewer resources, limited access, and no agency tend to be pushed to the peripheries, while people at the center relish power. In the current period, similar patterns are being reproduced in the virtual world with online education as a stark example.

To control the spread of the pandemic, many countries have closed educational institutes and learning shifted to online platforms. The shift was sudden, impromptu, and with no provision for the infrastructure and people’s readiness required for this technology-based learning modes. The shutdown of physical schools had many negative consequences. It not only affected the academic progress of students, but also shut access to mid-day meals and safe shelter that students from poorer families were highly reliant on. School shutdowns also took away significant opportunities for socialization with peers which is an integral part of the cognitive and social development of children.

The shutdown of schools and colleges has affected millions of poor students, and evidence suggests that for countries with low learning outcomes, a large number of school dropouts, and insufficient infrastructure, the impact will be far more negative. It simply means that many from marginalized groups are unlikely to return to schools and those who were never in schools to begin with will continue to be excluded from learning opportunities even for foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy.

Given the massive risks to health of social interactions in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments around the world have resorted to continued school closures or blended approaches to learning. In this context, online education has been promoted as the best alternative - a field dominated by private, for profit players. Data clearly shows that almost half of the world’s students face barriers in accessing computers and internet facilities. According to the 2017-2018 National Sample Survey report on education, only 24% of Indian households have an internet facility and more than 36% of schools in India operate without electricity. These disparities become distinctly visible across geographic locations, incomes, and education groups, ethnicities, and people with special needs.

The outcomes of the Youth-led Action Research (YAR) studies (May-July, 2020), facilitated by ASPBAE in nine countries in the Asia Pacific, highlighted the varied forms of discrimination, gaps, and challenges in the education system in the era of COVID-19.

In Mongolia and Bangladesh, researchers reported that many students who could not access online education are left behind and fear to drop out of formal education completely, it will be challenging to bring them back to schools.

Youth researchers from Indonesia shared that students who are living in the remote parts do not have electricity and phone network. It is almost impossible for them to own devices and access internet. Participants added, “students also need to buy internet quota which is expensive, and who buys it does not know how to use internet properly. Teachers only give home assignments and expect parents to monitor and support their children”

This observation was shared by the researchers in East Timor. They underscored the difficulties of youth especially in rural areas in accessing distance learning opportunities as they do not have access, not only to internet facilities, but also to electricity connections. Even low-tech solutions through radio and television have not been viable for them. The youth researchers have recommended that physical learning materials (books, handouts) are still the most viable medium for teaching and learning in most of the rural areas. For areas where internet connectivity is available, they come at a high price. Access
to free internet services will be especially helpful for marginalised youth to access formal and non formal learning opportunities including information on health and safety and on livelihood opportunities.

Youth researchers from Nepal reported that the pandemic is creating the educational disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children, youth, and adults. They added, youths from the middle class family are somehow able to access the e-learning classes however, these classes were reported to be boring and ineffective for the youths. Besides, children from low class families are not able to access these classes and neither the radio and television programs have been effective for them.

In Philippines, researchers described the disparity of education services in private and public schools. They mentioned, “high-paying private schools easily shifted to online-based platforms and digital tools but accessing the online platform have been difficult for most public school pupils and students”. It was noted that for many marginalized children and youth the community learning centers (CLC) are significant support. But many CLCs are either closed and or are running with very little or no financial support. Furthermore, lack of access to online learning has also negatively affected skills development training.

Female youth researchers from rural India argued that access to online education has strong gender barriers. According to their research, girls face more challenges in accessing the internet and owning devices. One of the YAR researchers shared that, “Only 20% of the girls we interviewed have a smartphone. Even if they have a smartphone, they may or may not have the internet on it due to poor network connectivity in their villages’. She further added, “If this continues for some more time, that is, schools remain closed and online education continues to be the norm, we will remain excluded, and 33% of girls said that they are then likely to drop out of education”. Where on one hand education is advocated as one of the pathways to come out of the intergenerational cycle of poverty and oppression, at the ground level, youth who are living in this challenging environment, are anxious and unsure of their prospects. Furthermore, due to increased expenses, loss of income, and to survive, some poor parents are inclined to marry off girls at a younger age.

Young researchers from Sri Lanka shed light on the perspective of teachers. Teachers are under tremendous pressure - they do not have adequate tools, training, and internet services for digital teaching. Even after many requests and follow up by teachers, the government seems to be indifferent to their plight.

Arising from the outcomes of the study, the YAR youth group drew up as set of recommendations addressed to government, civil society organisations, and other partners to address the deep divides and huge gaps in education and learning access of young people -

- Make higher education free and accessible to everyone and safely restart school and colleges at the earliest, with priority attention to ensuring the health and safety of students and educators.
- Increase scholarships to marginalized youth.
- Promote local education and training, especially at the village level - community learning centers need to be strengthened and sustained.
- Television, radio, and other low-tech tools can be explored to include communities in education.
- Ensure that education is a public good and that the state performs key responsibilities, including ensuring access to online platforms for all learners and teachers through transformative education systems.
- Complete lockdowns bring untold hardship to people, especially the marginalised. Governments should develop resilient education and development systems, equipped to deal with emergency situations that protect the lives and interests of all its people.
- Teachers need to be equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills on information technologies and distance education.
Governments should implement and promote policies that bridge the digital divide and move countries closer to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

The partners in 9 countries produced their research reports and are currently engaged in the dissemination of the research findings and recommendations. Since this form of research is grounded in actions, many of the partners carried parallel local actions and advocacies. In Timor-Leste, for example, the youth researchers’ group presented their research to the national Secretary of the State for vocational training and employment where they asked for state budget allocations for youth demands, specifically establishing non-formal education and training opportunities as a Community Learning Center (CLC). In the Philippines, E-Net Philippines and other partners facilitated virtual spaces for youth activism and advocacy. Community youth were actively involved in educational campaigns, relief work, and advocacy activities. Various youth-led campaigns were designed for holding the government accountable and responsible to safeguard citizens’ right to food, right to education, and the right to ask questions. Based on the findings and recommendations, youth researchers developed a series of videos, and podcasts, and organized webinars and Facebook live sessions to reach out to the larger youth constituency.

YAR partners are determined to continue these follow-up local actions and inform their policy advocacy work by youth voices from ground realities. ASPBAE is happy to see its youth work forming its own shape and speaking to the realities of the marginalized youth in the region.