

COVID-19 and Education: Impact, Action, and Hope

While this issue of ASPBAE Ed-lines is being prepared, many parts of the world which have been forced into various forms of lockdown are moving slowly and cautiously into a new “with COVID” normal. The shift to this uncertain situation, unknown to all of humanity only a few months ago, will affect society and governments at varying levels going forward.

Particularly for education, the impact of the COVID pandemic has been sweeping, deep, and ultimately long-

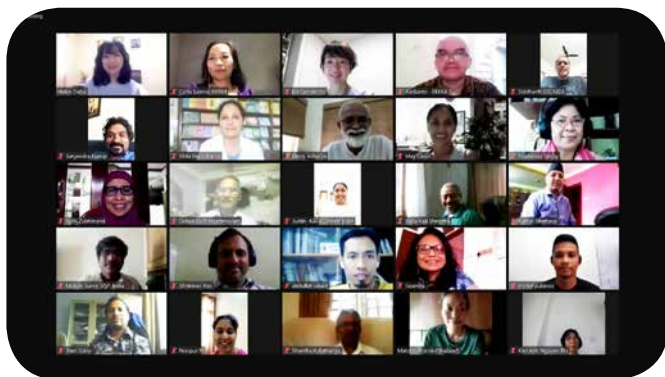


While on-line and digital modes will be an inevitable part of education delivery, education systems in many countries in the Asia Pacific have yet to fully embrace and embed this in their education systems.

lasting. Much lessons can be learned from this experience to further strengthen public education systems and bring to bear the aspirations embodied in SDG4.

Impact: school closures, many left-behind, and the reality of low financing for education in the Asia Pacific

When governments declared various forms of lockdowns and emergency interventions to control the spread of COVID-19, school closures were immediately imposed, which affected an unprecedented number of students, learners, parents, teachers, the overall education management and delivery system and the support communities built around it.



ASPBAE and its partner coalitions have participated in on-line discussions to adjust advocacy strategies to ensure that CSOs remain engaged and able to inform education actions of governments in response to COVID-19.

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ASPBAE is calling for the protection of education budgets as it will contribute to early and long-term recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNESCO estimates that as of 15 June 2020, 1.09 billion learners worldwide, representing over 62.3% of the world's total enrolled student population, have been affected by school closures. Nearly 325 million children have been missing school for nearly two months in East Asia and the Pacific. This is in addition to the 35 million children who were already out of school since pre-COVID-19.

An immediate mode of education delivery being promoted and resorted to in the early days of the lockdowns was through online or digital means, however, this was swiftly met with widespread criticisms and concerns from students and learners, parents, and even teachers at all levels of education in many countries as these further highlighted societal inequalities in education. Even before the pandemic, access to internet and digital devices in low-income and lower-middle income countries in the region remained low due to high costs, limited bandwidth capabilities, and out of reach for those in rural and remote areas.

The sudden pressure on teachers, students, and learners to shift to on-line modes of education have left many of them behind. Equity, inclusion, and gender issues in education were further exposed by the pandemic when the poor, those in remote and rural areas, people with disabilities, out-of-school children and youth, marginalised adult learners, women and girls, refugees, and those in fragile contexts were left with little to no means of accessing education and learning.

While on-line and digital modes will be an inevitable part of education delivery now and in the future, education systems in many countries in the Asia Pacific region have yet to fully embrace and embed this in their education

systems with a clear blueprint on how education modalities can be a good balance and mix of no-technology, low-technology, and high-technology solutions that will be responsive to varying contexts, within formal and non-formal systems and will leave no one behind as envisaged in SDG4.

Action: Strong civil society solidarity to protect education

At the global level, civil society representatives to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) have supported the deployment of GPE funds of more than \$500 million to developing country partners to finance their mitigation and early recovery efforts in education on account of the pandemic.

At the regional level, ASPBAE and its partner national education coalitions have engaged in various on-line discussions within the education movement in the region to exchange experiences, learn from each other, and adjust advocacy strategies to ensure that civil society organisations (CSOs) remain engaged, albeit through virtual means, and able to inform the education actions of governments in response to COVID-19.



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A concrete demonstration of a sustained virtual regional advocacy of ASPBAE and national education coalitions amidst the pandemic is their active engagement in the 7th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) organised by UNESCAP on 20 May 2020, wherein ASPBAE drew from the various recommendations of national education coalitions in their CSO SDG4 Spotlight Reports and developed these into priority recommendations to be used as inputs to the Chair's Statement for APFSD.

At the country level, a number of governments in the Asia Pacific, especially through their Ministries of Education, were able to organise on-line (Zoom) consultations with members of their consultative forums such as through the local education groups (LEGs) to come up with plans



ASPBAE, its members, and partners have amplified their voices in various platforms to ensure that education for marginalised youth and ALE are integrated in education responses, financing, and learning continuity plans of governments.

of actions to ensure continuity of learning amidst the pandemic. Representatives of national education coalitions and some ASPBAE staff were able to join these national level LEG Zoom meetings and discussions, particularly providing inputs around education equity, inclusion, gender, and financing.

Moreover, advocating for adult learning and education (ALE) is a prominent component of ASPBAE's work within its membership from national education coalitions, grassroots organisations, and ALE practitioners. Given the reality that ALE is not prominent in the SDG4 and SDG processes, ASPBAE and its members have consistently shored up capacities in ALE advocacy to engage the SDG processes so that ALE is given attention. Capacity building and advocacy on ALE is being done both at the country and regional levels.

As an example, ALE-related action in response to the ongoing pandemic is being crafted by ASPBAE members such as in India where they plan to do a documentation thru videos and podcasts looking at the impact of not having digital literacy, especially among women. This will bolster their advocacy on issues related to the impact of COVID-19 on marginalised women. Their documented cases in the form of interviews and videos will be presented to the government and will support their advocacy for digital literacy amongst women. This highlights the critical role ALE plays in building resilience and transforming the

lives of people and their communities.

ASPBAE, its members, and partners have amplified their voices in various platforms to ensure that education for marginalised youth and ALE are integrated in any education response, financing, and learning continuity plans of governments.

The virtual 'Regional Conference on Education Financing in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic', organised by ASPBAE from 16-18 June 2020, highlighted the need to protect education budgets that can support massive skills training, parents' education, and upscale ALE programmes. Domestic resources for education should support the increased need for re-tooling to adapt to new normal and support home/community-based learning.

The active engagements of CSOs at various levels tackling education, development, and human rights issues despite and amidst the restrictions in movements during the period of lockdowns and emergency measures imposed by governments have been very crucial. This is particularly notable in a number of countries in the region which instituted repressive measures that were meant to restrict democratic spaces and have allowed the military and police to curtail legitimate dissent in the name of containing the spread of COVID-19.

Hope: Future-Proofing Public Education Systems

As of 15 June 2020, there are already 23 countries in the region which have re-opened their schools. But even as many countries are starting to ease restrictions and prepare for resumption of schools, existing education issues which were further exacerbated by the pandemic will persist in the long-term unless, governments muster the political and financial will to protect their domestic resources for education.

Some of the situations playing out within government bureaucracy at the moment include significant re-alignments of budgets towards COVID crisis response, inter-ministerial competition to secure and retain their budget allocations at pre-COVID levels and narrow political agenda getting in the way of a more sustainable plan to better emerge from this crisis.

ASPBAE is calling for the protection of education budgets as it will contribute to early and long-term recovery from this pandemic. Building people and societal resilience in any crisis, such as this pandemic, means financing public education systems that are equitable, inclusive, gender transformative, safe and sustainable.

EDITORIAL

Investing in strengthening public education systems in a COVID-19 world

By Nasiba Mirpochoeva, Co-opted ASPBAE Executive Council Member representing Central Asia

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, leading to the near-total closures of schools, universities, and colleges. Most governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

School closures in response to the pandemic have resulted in various social and economic issues, including student debt, food insecurity, and homelessness, as well as the loss of access to childcare, health care, internet, and disability services. These were part of the overall lockdowns instituted by many governments to contain the spread – grounding economies to a halt and exacting huge economic costs to families who could not work, with



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impacts most felt by marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

In response to school closures, UNESCO recommended the use of



It is time for world leaders and all to build a strategy to prevent a reversal in the achievements to meet the SDG commitments and stay the course towards achieving its targets by 2030.

distance learning programmes and open educational applications and platforms that schools and teachers can use to reach learners remotely and limit the disruption of education.

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 is a global challenge that has caused a massive economic slowdown worldwide. Moreover, a global pandemic puts at risk the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and has thus become a big issue for all global leaders. Now, it is time for world leaders and all to build a strategy to prevent a reversal in the achievements to meet the SDG commitments and stay the course towards achieving its targets by 2030.

In the current global context and as a result of school closures, on-line education and distance learning will definitely become a more integral part of education systems. It is believed that on-line learning may enforce creativity and creative learning; yet, this potential can only be realized with enhanced professional development of teachers, better learning materials, and conducive learning environments within communities and households. A



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reliance on on-line and distance learning can reinforce disparity in education access. Addressing this will require significant investments in ICT and distance learning technologies which are more readily and freely available to learners from poorer, more remote communities.

For-profit, private sector domination and control of these spaces should be averted. These, and the new demands on education systems as schools also re-open, for

example, in expanded health and sanitation facilities or remedial instruction, will necessitate higher budgetary allocations for education if governments are to meet their obligations as duty-bearers to ensure the right to education of all. Therefore, education financing should be high on the agenda of decision makers in any country despite the global economic slowdown.

There is an urgent need for strengthening and investing in public education systems that are able to deliver quality education in various and blended modes suitable to the conditions of various students and learners, leaving no one behind. Social dialogue and broad-based consultations with all the stakeholders in education including civil society will best equip governments to meet this challenge, and should therefore be an integral part of the development and roll-out of their education and learning continuity strategies.



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¹<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

² www.unicef.org

³ www.unesco.org

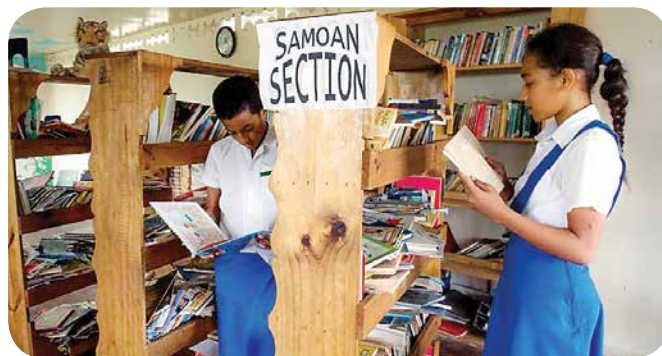
A call for protecting public education through the COVID crisis

Education is one of the worst hit sectors by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing the massive closure of schools and learning institutions, globally. The poorest and most vulnerable among them experienced food deprivation, loss of family income and livelihood, insecurity, and increasing risks of disengaging completely from education. Girls and women endure multiple burdens as they deal with increasing domestic work, bigger caregiving responsibilities, and greater risks of violence. Persons with disabilities are further immobilized and faced greater challenges in accessing education, health services, and social support. The global pandemic has exposed people's vulnerabilities and exacerbated existing inequalities in education, healthcare, and social protection systems.

The extended lockdown and quarantine have disrupted and paralyzed economic activities, resulting in massive business shutdowns, job losses, reduced work hours, and salary cuts. The global economy is predicted to contract 3% in 2020, while most countries will experience deep recession for the current year and even beyond as recovery from the health emergency may take longer than originally expected. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) described the economic crisis as the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Developing economies took a sharp fall as export demand drops while commodity prices plunged to historic low levels.

In the Philippines, for example, the economy already shrank by 0.2% in the first quarter of the year and is expected to decline by 2% to 3.2% in 2020, the first contraction in 22 years since the Asian financial crisis. The incidence of severe hunger has more than doubled in the National Capital Region which has been the worst hit by the health emergency. Unemployment rate rose to 17.7% in April 2020, which is over three times the average rate in the previous 12 months.

Governments around the world responded with equally staggering stimulus packages, aiming for a "V-shape" or



ASPBAE asserts that recovery must prioritise investments in building human capabilities and well-being, and in strengthening public institutions to deliver better quality services.

rapid recovery by injecting and diverting massive funds to stimulate economic activities. At least \$10 trillion (about 10% of the world's Gross Domestic Product) have been poured into the global economy to recover from the paralyzing impact of the health emergency. Unfortunately, apart from immediate health-related support and emergency social assistance, much of the stimulus funding will go to the business sector, with less priority given to education and other essential social services. This type of stimulus may actually widen inequalities and leave people vulnerable to future emergencies.

Tremendous pressure is exerted on the education budgets in most countries as the sector competes for dwindling resources given the expected contraction of the economy, the reduction of government revenues, and the huge spending to fight COVID-19. It is unfortunate that much of the stimulus packages focus on support to the business sector to accelerate economic activities, aiming for rapid recovery. Generous support is extended to distressed industries with provisions of equity infusion, interest-free loans, subsidies, and reduced or deferred corporate income taxes, thus, drastically reducing government revenues. In the process, education is crowded out and relegated to a lower budget priority. This is compounded by assertions made that "education can wait" and that the sector is a high-risk spreader of the coronavirus, and a low contributor to economic recovery.

ASPBAE asserts that the recovery, that is sustainable and transformative, must prioritise investments in building human capabilities and well-being, and in strengthening public institutions to deliver better quality services. ASPBAE further asserts that education is a basic human right and a key component to achieve sustainable recovery from the global pandemic. We must protect public education and its financing, and combat the COVID-19 pandemic with quality education that is equitable and inclusive. We must Invest in the long-term transformation of the education systems based on the lessons learned and innovations emerging from the crisis. We must use this pandemic as an opportunity for building better education, health and social protection systems that are more just, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable.



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Adult learning and COVID-19: The New Zealand experience

By Colin McGregor, ACE (Adult and Community Education) Aotearoa Director

ACE Aotearoa conducted an on-line survey over the initial two-week period of the 2020 lockdown on the impact of COVID-19 on adult learning organisations and learners. We wanted to find out how the ACE sector was responding to the crisis, the challenges, and what support was needed to continue operating from home.

We received 61 responses to the survey, and a few responses by email. The information collected was used to inform our professional development activity resulting in the offer of on-line workshops with specific topics primarily aimed at learning to meet and teach online. The information was also shared with key stakeholders including the Ministry of Education, and the Tertiary Education Commission (funding organisation) so that they could better understand the situation for our sector.

We found that the most common form of provision, at that time, was through on-line platforms and social media (70% of all respondents). Others said they used the telephone (54%), and using apps (20%).

When asked what challenges their organisation faced in continuing to operate, the responses fell into two groups: the challenges for providers working remotely and the challenges for learners.

Provider difficulties in working remotely included: staff having to learn how to use on-line platforms and how to facilitate sessions – this can take time; volunteer tutors not being confident with on-line delivery; not being able to access resources in the office; difficulty in accessing digital devices or mobile phone for learners;



The recently announced budget saw an additional \$16 million NZ dollars being allocated to adult and community education over the next 5 years.

poor connectivity; demands on Wi-Fi in the home, with multiple family members using the internet; the fact that teaching on-line is more demanding in terms of time; the difficulty in teaching practical skills on-line; difficulty in providing pastoral support on the phone; difficulties in assessing learner needs remotely; and uncertainty about funding.



ACE Aotearoa conducted an on-line survey on the impact of COVID-19 on adult learning organisations and learners to find out how the ACE sector was responding to the crisis, the challenges, and what support was needed.

Learner difficulties in working remotely included:

learners not having the necessary digital skills; the competing need to look after children; not being connected to the internet; low literacy, and low incomes - for example, some learners cannot afford to use their minutes on their Smartphones to do any on-line activities or send and receive information.

When asked what support organisations need to continue to operate during this period, the responses fell into the following main themes -

Future Focus: Attention to life after the lock down and the tools for people to transition to new ways of working which is not likely to be business as usual.

Funding: Some organisations said that they need reassurance about income. Others said that extra funding is needed to buy software and hardware for staff – and to buy laptops or tablets plus vouchers for learners so they can access the internet.

Staffing: This included support for staff working from home trying to maintain home/work balance; digital upskilling for volunteers; and reassurance that tutors will be able to resume classes.

Resources: Staff do not have the resources they need. For example, staff who live rurally have found their internet speeds do not support video calling or downloading of large files which means no matter what organisations do, productivity will decrease. The following resources would be great - basic IT support; devices for staff and learners; support with upgrading IT systems; information on and assistance in getting materials, resources, access to learning platforms. Innovative resources and ways of connecting with people virtually; Technical and digital platform for mentoring.

Skills: Most responders indicated a need for professional development - particularly in zoom, online learning, web

platforms, and adapting courses to go online.

Respondents identified a few other issues, including the possibility of working together more, and concern about future funding.

There were also positive comments such as government funding flexibility; the fact that they have been ‘forced’ to become more technologically literate, the team support that some organisations enjoyed; and the support of ACE Aotearoa.

As one respondent put it: “The crisis is proving that long distance learning-with the right supports- for our

communities can happen.”

New Zealand is fortunate in that the leadership of the country has enabled us to become one of very few nations who managed the COVID-19 crisis very well. As of June 2020, there are no COVID-19 cases in New Zealand - a huge achievement. In addition, the recently announced May budget saw an additional \$16 million NZ dollars being allocated to the Adult and Community Education sector over the next 5 years. This is a huge investment in difficult economic circumstances.

Visit <https://www.aceaotearoa.org.nz/> to know more about ACE Aotearoa.

Working towards equitable and inclusive access to learning opportunities in Afghanistan

By Wolfgang Schur, Afghanistan Coordinator, DVV International

The spread of COVID-19 is not the only threat for education systems in Afghanistan. It coincides with a very complex political situation and the continuing armed conflict, and puts additional stress on the struggling, weak, and underfinanced education system.

The public health system has been weakened during the long years of conflict too and is not accessible throughout the country. Each day of continuing conflict and fighting exposes the Afghan population to greater dangers, and the COVID-19 outbreak is further spreading.

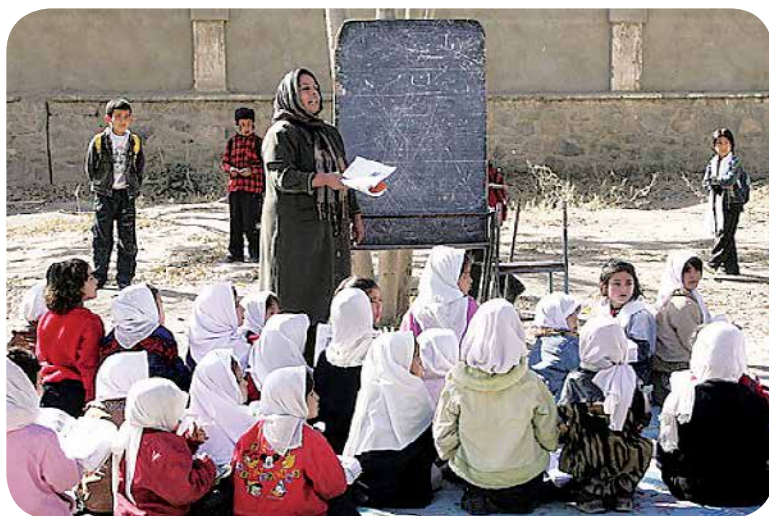
A number of provinces have instituted measures to limit the exposure of residents to COVID-19 and curb the further spread of the virus. On 14 March 2020, the government officially closed down all education institutions and disrupted the education of several million students - now until the end of August.

As a consequence, the Afghan National Association for Adult Education (ANAF AE) had to close down its adult education centres and all literacy programmes were stopped. Many NGOs faced the problem to continue paying their teachers.

Given the increasing risks of COVID-19, ANAF AE suddenly had to switch from traditional face-to-face learning to distance and online-learning options. This was a completely new situation for all and still is a huge challenge. Distance learning via television and radio

existed in the country before, but on a low level and often heavily dependent on international funding.

At the beginning of the shutdown, all educational institutions, except some very advanced private universities, and teachers did not have the skills to deliver distance or e-learning. The public education system and NGO-based education programmes in urban areas did not have the necessary infrastructure to allow children and young adults to participate in distance or digital education. It was worse in rural areas. Many families do not have access to internet or devices; even if they have a TV, regular electricity cuts are an additional challenge.



The public education system and NGO-based education programmes in urban and rural areas in Afghanistan do not have the necessary infrastructure to enable children and young adults to participate in distance or digital education.

Equitable and inclusive access to relevant, safe, and quality learning opportunities for children, youth, and adults, especially for women and girls, is one of the three key objectives of the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP). As schools shut down and classes move to distance and on-line learning, many students suffer, and social and economic inequalities grow. Particularly vulnerable and marginalised children and young adults, who are experiencing social and economic hardship, are more affected in their studies in this pandemic.

The pandemic situation showed that the government is unable to address this crisis alone; collective efforts are required. In the 'Education in Emergency Working Group', government, various ministries, civil society, Community Development Centres, and international actors jointly worked out an emergency response plan to - ensure the continuity of education; utilise existing resources and capacities through various innovative ways; continue education service delivery



ANAF AE has introduced an open source learning platform and has trained approximately 100 teachers. Teachers video recorded literacy lessons and distributed them to learners and their families.

a week on ASR, a private TV channel in Afghanistan.

ANAF AE introduced the open source based 'moodle' learning platform and trained approximately 100 teachers in phase one of its work. Preparing learning content for the on-line platform required substantive efforts. Teachers first developed demo courses and then facilitated pilot courses with small groups of learners. As of today, the on-line courses are on-going in all 16 centres of the ANAF AE adult education network. In addition, students from all over Afghanistan, even from outside the country, can now register. Employability courses, start-up of own business, English courses, and IT subjects are mostly requested. A first review of the feedback functions of the e-learning platform shows that students are enthusiastic.

ANAF AE teachers video recorded literacy courses and lessons and distributed them to learners and their families. These programmes helped increase knowledge and improve literacy in families and contributed to filling the education gap.

ANAF AE has achieved important positive results in this regard. The crisis situation demanded unique changes and for new models of education, despite the many inequalities that the shutdown revealed. The biggest concern now is safeguarding equality.

This crisis situation and the development of the education system requires greater efforts on the part of governments to prioritise education budgets; for international donors to prioritise financing for education; and creative thinking by all on expanding social support programmes for vulnerable groups to support their education – issues that ANAF AE and the Afghanistan National Education Coalition (ANEC) actively lobby for.

Visit <https://anafae.af/> to know more about ANAF AE.



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to students in their homes; and use mediums such as distance learning, television, radio, and mobile phones. At the same time, distance capacity building programmes are being conducted for teachers and other education practitioners.

The implementation of the plan seems to be relatively successful in several provinces, despite technical challenges. Governmental programmes and private media outlets are airing learning programmes free of charge to provide learning opportunities for children and families during the crisis. For example, one hour of school lessons and two hours of programmes aimed at raising families' awareness about the COVID-19 threat are aired six days

Working towards education for livelihoods during the COVID-19 crisis: the ASPPUK Indonesia experience

By Mohammad Firdaus, ASPPUK Expert Team

It was in March 2020 when the first COVID-19 case was detected in Indonesia. Based on data from the COVID-19 National Task Force (as of 10 June 2020), 33,076 have been infected.

Like in most countries in the world, the pandemic had an adverse impact on the economic sector of Indonesia. To better understand how this particularly affected poorer communities and women, the Association for Women in Small Business Assistance (ASPPUK) collected data from 28,845 women in small-micro businesses (the PUK-mikro) located in 80 districts and cities in Indonesia. A total of 82.43% respondents stated that their product sales decreased. In addition, 81.50% found it difficult to send their products to sales centers, hence their products were left undistributed.

Meanwhile, to prevent the number of infected patients from increasing, the Government of Indonesia implemented the “Masks for All” programme as per the World Health Organization’s (WHO) recommendation. The high demand for masks and the downturn in the economic situation of the country signaled an opportunity for the PUK-mikro. Therefore, ASPPUK, along with the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection (MoWECP), developed



ASPPUK, along with the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection, developed a programme for poor women involving the production and marketing of cloth masks involving women in small micro businesses and their families.



Observing the rise of unemployment, especially among young people before and during the COVID crisis, ASPPUK scaled up its mentoring activities for prospective and existing youth entrepreneurs for business development.

a programme for poor women involving the production and marketing of standardised cloth masks involving the PUK-mikro and their families.

Masks were produced by 285 PUK-mikro located in various provinces in Indonesia that were declared affected zones. They were assisted by ASPPUK members. Funding for purchasing the materials, the costs of the production processes, and distribution was provided by the MoWECP.

PUK-mikro produced 11,050 cloth masks which were distributed to target areas through women’s group networks in 43 districts and cities - from the district to the village level. During the distribution process, ASPPUK representatives demonstrated how to wear the masks and explained the importance of doing so to prevent the spread of the virus and to protect themselves and their families during the pandemic.

Observing the rise of unemployment, especially among young people before and especially during the COVID crisis, ASPPUK scaled up its mentoring activities for prospective and existing youth entrepreneurs for business development. The activities were carried out in South and Southeast Sulawesi Provinces and were a part of the Empowering Youth for Work (EYFW) programme.

168 youth participated in entrepreneurship trainings that were based on the principles of the 3 P’s – people, planet, and profit. A total of 70 business proposals were selected by March 2020. ASPPUK formed mentor teams to work with the selected youth to be strong business people and to inspire others through their work, particularly during the pandemic. Mentoring activities were carried out online. Mentor team members were from various backgrounds. Some of them were lecturers on business management in universities, successful businesswomen who had been guided by ASPPUK, experts in on-line marketing and media, and members of the regional corporate social responsibility (CSR) board.

The mentor teams and the youth were able to develop business plans for the young people to get back on their feet in these difficult times.

Visit <http://asppuk.or.id/> to know more about ASPPUK.

CSEP participates in the development of the proposal for the COVID-19 Response Fund of GPE

By Jose de Jesus, CSEP Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste started its “lockdown”, or emergency intervention on account of COVID-19, on 27 March until 26 May 2020 wherein all schools and educational institutions (public and private) and public offices were ordered to close, and restrictions on public movements in Timor-Leste were imposed during this period. Restrictions were further extended until 26 June, but some form of relaxation was allowed, including religious activities and preparatory activities for the re-opening of schools, as long as social distancing and health protocols were observed. However, the country’s airport and land borders remained closed as of 7 June 2020.



Civil society organisations, including CSEP Timor-Leste, established a COVID-19 Impact Information Centre to monitor the situation and advocate for social protection and development amidst the pandemic.

While the country is grappling with the massive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Timor-Leste has been facing ongoing political instability, which has heavily affected education and development efforts in the country. As cited in the proposal of the Timor-Leste government for the COVID-19 Response Fund of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), “the political instability in Timor-Leste meant in late 2019 the Eighth Constitutional Government was unable to guarantee the parliamentary majority to ensure the passing of its 2020 government programme and budget.”

This combination of having to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuing political instability has impacted the country’s educational system and put tremendous pressure on its development prospects.

CSO and CSEP advocacy engagements to protect education amidst the pandemic

Since the implementation of the lockdown in the country, civil society organisations (CSOs), which include the Civil Society Education Partnership (CSEP), and led by the umbrella organisation of CSOs, the Forum NGO Timor-Leste (FONGTIL), established a COVID-19 Impact Information Center to monitor the situation and advocate for social protection and development amidst the pandemic.

It has been noted early in the period of emergency that access to alternative modes of education and learning, which was mainly through online means, are limited and will not be able to reach marginalised sectors such as people with disabilities, women and girls, marginalised youth, those in poor communities, and those in rural and remote areas of Timor-Leste. Many from these sectors are not prepared for and have no equipment for distance learning - computers, smart phones, even TV or radio.

This understanding has guided CSEP in their policy engagements with government on their COVID 19 responses related to education.

CSEP participated in two virtual meetings by the Ação Conjunta para a Educação (ACETL), which is the equivalent of a Local Education Group (LEG) in



CSEP’s active cooperation with CSOs at the national, regional (ASPBAE), and global (GCE) levels has facilitated timely action and analysis to sustain advocacy for the protection of the public education systems amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

the country, via Zoom call meetings on 16th and 30th of April 2020. The meetings were co-organised by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MEYS) and UNICEF together with all development partners in Timor-Leste. Jose de Jesus (National Coordinator, CSEP), Moises Charles (Programme Officer, CSEP) and Rince Nipu (Director of Organizasaun Haburas Moris-OHM, a member of CSEP based in Bobonaro Municipal which borders Indonesia) participated in these meetings. ASPBAE Capacity Support and Advocacy Adviser for CSEP Timor-Leste, Helen Dabu, also joined the ACETL/LEG Zoom Call on 16 April and provided support to the CSEP National Coordinator, Jose de Jesus, on the areas that need strengthening in the proposal of the government to access the COVID-19 Response Fund of GPE.

In these meetings, CSEP National Coordinator recommended the inclusion of marginalised youth to ensure that they will benefit from the distance learning

programme, or “Eskola ba Uma”, to be delivered in Tetum language so that they will not be left behind in their learning during the pandemic. CSEP also reached out to UNICEF Timor-Leste to share and circulate the Eskola ba Uma/Distance learning materials through CSEP’s website and Facebook pages so that the public have greater access to these materials, including the Learning Passport Application that was launched by UNICEF and Microsoft.

CSEP’s active cooperation with CSOs at the national, regional (ASPBAE), and global (GCE) levels has facilitated its timely action and analysis to sustain its advocacy for the protection of the public education system and access of marginalised sectors amidst the pandemic.

Visit CSEP’s Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/ceptil.timorleste/> - to know more about the organisation.

Supporting community education for children, youth, and adults in Bangladesh during COVID-19

By Ehsanur Rahman, Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), Bangladesh, and ASPBAE Executive Council Member representing South and Central Asia

With the closure of all educational institutions due to COVID-19 in early March, Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) teams in both formal education institutions and non-formal education programmes started exploring ways to support continuity

of education and communicating emergency health messages related to the spread of the coronavirus. In the context of restrictions to mobility due to the country-wide shut down and social distancing requirements, and like many other countries, virtual education through electronic media and social media came as possible alternatives.



DAM’s literacy and life skills education agenda of adult learning focused on coronavirus risk messaging. DAM started an awareness campaign across its fields in 43 districts for ‘hand washing’, ‘social distancing’, and ‘self-quarantine’.

In the initial analysis, several challenges came to surface, including reaching students and learners, preparedness of teachers, limited or no access to digital devices, and poor connectivity. Though the challenges were common for both types of formal and non-formal education, the situation become more difficult for non-formal education programmes.

The journey began with a short survey to reach out-of-school children (OOSC) who were enrolled in various child centres/Community Learning Centres (CLC) for non-formal education programmes. The community teachers collected data on learners’ access to mobile phones - individual or home based, type of phone

(smart phone or feature phone), access to internet connectivity, availability of mobile data services, etc.

Teachers started using parents' (or in some cases learners') phones to impart messages. Subject-based teachers made group phone calls where 5-7 learners



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participated. During the brief lessons, the teachers played interactive roles, gave homework and made a daily lesson assessment of the learning process. In this way, teachers gradually reached all learners 3-4 times a week.

Similar initiatives and process were followed in the formal education institutions of DAM. Besides phone-based instructional services, teachers also used on-line based platforms like Facebook Live, Messenger, WhatsApp, Zoom, and Google Classroom. Learners with access to smart phones or computers and internet connectivity, directly attended the live class. However, due to limited access to devices, poor internet connectivity, and the cost of the internet, on-line live class attendance was relatively low. Only 15-20% of non-formal learners could regularly reach real-time live classes.

In the COVID-19 context, the literacy and life skills education agenda of adult learning focused on coronavirus risk communication messaging. DAM started an awareness raising campaign across its fields in 43 districts for 'hand washing', 'social distancing', and 'self-quarantine'. In one month, DAM reached 270,135 individuals with clear guidelines on what to do. DAM field teams undertook awareness campaigns using mobile phones, electronic, print, and social media. They

distributed 155,000 leaflets containing precautionary messages. Festoons and other materials were placed in different sites of the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar for raising awareness and keeping people safe. In virtual settings through Facebook Live, DAM continuously organized orientation and demonstration sessions and meetings for service providers on COVID-19 issues.

With easing of the lockdown situation, adult learning and education activities were expanded with teachers visiting homes, observing social distancing measures. Teachers were able to reach out to 5-6 learners a day.

Lessons for the future indicate that the preparedness for education in a COVID-19 era would have to be comprehensive, covering programmatic, infrastructural, environmental, and financial issues. Specific to learners, some apprehensions included limited or no access to digital devices, irregular attendance due to work engagements, lagging behind in learning, increased dropouts, increased cost

for education, increase in child labour, child trafficking, early marriage and early pregnancy.

CAMPE Bangladesh, as a national coalition for education in the country, based on a rapid field survey on COVID responses by NGOs, came up with a set of recommendations for short-term measures and a medium-term expectation that at least a three-year plan would be required to deal with the disruption of the academic calendar, completing lessons, adjusting exams, adjusting vacations, and supporting learners. Particular emphasis must be given to teachers' skill development and institutional e-infrastructure development complementing mass media-based lessons (TV, radio, Internet, and mobile phones). CAMPE has demanded for an 'Education Loss Recovery' strategy to protect education and prevent reversal, increase the education budget to a minimum of 15% of the national budget as part of the national recovery budget, and ensure efficient and targeted use of allocated resources. Dhaka Ahsania Mission is an active member of CAMPE. Its experience in COVID-19 responses informed CAMPE's deliberations on its policy recommendations.

Visit <http://www.ahsaniamission.org.bd/> to know more about DAM.

NCE Nepal steps up advocacy to protect education budgets

By Ram Gaire, NCE Nepal

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an education crisis. Already, the extended and uncertain duration of school closures, lack of mobility, and lockdowns have had adverse effects in the children's well-being and created much stress for families. There is a high risk



NCE Nepal lobbied for continued efforts of the government and CSOs to pursue national education objectives to improve access and quality of education in response to the pandemic.

that improvements in educational access, brought on after decade-long efforts of the government, civil society organisations (CSOs), and stakeholders, will be reversed resulting in greater inequality in education and society.

In Nepal, the government has opted for on-line learning to ensure that education rights of children are not compromised during emergencies. Virtual classes via radio and television have thus been run. However, there is vast inequality in access to technology: only 13% of schools in Nepal have facilities to access the internet, and only 55% of households and 51% of students have access to media such as radio and TV. The majority of children do not have access to books, internet, or a computer at home. Teacher capacity to deliver distance teaching is also uneven, and equally important, parents lack awareness about home schooling. A deterioration in the psychological and mental health of children and youth has been observed during this crisis. Reports on child abuse and sexual violence in last three months in homes and in quarantine centers also indicate elevated risks to gender-based violence of children, adolescent girls and women during this pandemic. It is evident that extended school closures have caused not only loss of learning in the short term, but have further resulted in an increase in dropout rates and an increase in out-of-school children. It has already been projected by the government that due to the pandemic situation created by

COVID-19, around 0.5- 2.1 million children will drop out from school this academic year.

In the face of these, efforts have been made by CSOs to ensure that access to inclusive, equitable quality education is sustained through the crisis. The National Campaign for Education Nepal (NCE Nepal), as an active member of Local Education Group, during the Budget Review Meeting 2020, lobbied and advocated for the continued collective efforts of the government and CSOs to pursue and achieve the education objectives under the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) implementing reforms to improve access and quality of education with immediate responses to the impact of the pandemic on education sector.

NCE also recommended in the Budget Review Mission (BRM) to ensure that the work plan and budget for the fiscal year 2020/21 incorporate the contingency plan prepared by the Education Cluster (which NCE also contributed to) so that local governments have sufficient resources to provide access to education during the pandemic. The BRM recommended a set of agreed actions to expedite the SSDP implementation in the final year under the broader purview of the immediate, medium, and long-term impact of COVID-19 on the education sector in Nepal.

NCE Nepal, through its district coordination committees, has been active in raising awareness on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (regular and proper hand washing and sanitizing, wearing masks, maintaining social distance, etc.). It has also engaged in raising awareness about the continuation of education amidst the pandemic, and conducting psycho-social counseling, especially in rural



Active engagement and leadership of youth and girls from marginalised communities helped spread NCE Nepal's COVID-19 advocacy messages.

areas of the country where there is less access to any form of media. Child-friendly awareness-raising videos and infographics were prepared in local languages and disseminated at the grassroots level. Moreover, use of online and social media, radio, and TV also strengthened the awareness campaign regarding learning during emergencies. Information was provided to parents about home schooling and socio-psychological counselling were provided.

Young people figured prominently in NCE's efforts. Active engagement and leadership of youth and girls from marginalised communities helped spread advocacy messages at the local level. The youth-led action research initiative of NCE Nepal documented the challenges marginalized youth face during the pandemic and their role in crisis management. Discussions were held with parliamentarians, political leaders, and social advocates to ensure leadership and motivation of young people in the education and COVID 19 responses and to promote their well-being.

NCE's advocacy to increase budgets for the education sector to promote learning during the crisis was brought to the wider public. NCE launched and participated in several on-line and radio debates and discussions at the

national and district level on this subject. Public service messages disseminated in Nepal not only provided information about ways to ensure learning during the crisis but also advocated with the local, provincial, and national government for education to be considered the foundation for a prosperous nation and thus needing adequate funding during the crisis.

Even through the restrictions in mobility and travel, NCE continued its wide outreach to its members throughout the country. The civil society recommendations to parliamentarians for learning during COVID-19 emerging had come out of seven (7) different consultations in Nepal to best reflect a wide range of perspectives of civil society, especially the grassroots.

The essence of education is to defeat the learning crisis and, for this, NCE Nepal is engaged in continuous advocacy with the government to prioritise education during the crisis. These national advocacy efforts have amplified the education campaign and has resulted in some positive signs of hope that Nepal will not fall behind in its efforts for equitable and inclusive learning that has been achieved through a decade-long struggle.

Visit <http://ncenepal.org.np/> to know more about NCE Nepal.

Girls and women in the frontlines: Digital literacy in times of COVID-19

By Archana Dwivedi, Nirantar, India

The current lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the lives of the most marginalised people living in rural and urban areas in India. The lockdown has not only heightened the vulnerabilities of marginalised people, but it has also deepened structural disparities leading to unprecedented scales of deprivation and exclusion. Women, girls, and those who are non-binary have been adversely affected, even within marginalised communities.

Nirantar, a resource centre for gender and education, works towards the empowerment of young girls and women



Women and young girls of learning centres from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Delhi slums showed courage and leadership in reaching out and helping communities, using their newly-acquired digital skills and confidence.

in both urban and rural areas in India using critical gender perspective and feminist pedagogies. For the last two years, Nirantar has been focussing on digital literacy as the new language of rights and entitlements that facilitated teachers and learners to continue their work using digital platforms in the lockdown circumstances. While

Nirantar was always convinced that digital literacy was the future of Adult Learning and Education (ALE), it never imagined it would become a lifeline for thousands of community people and a most important tool in the hands of adult educators and learners to provide crucial relief and support to fellow community members.



Nirantar played a crucial role in bridging information gaps that frontline workers were experiencing while working closely with communities, whether regarding government schemes or myths on COVID-19.

Since the lockdown was announced, women and young girls of learning centres from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Delhi slums have shown tremendous courage and leadership in reaching out and helping their communities, using their newly-acquired digital skills and confidence. They carried out relief work across diverse locations; they identified the most vulnerable families and worked with local government officials to provide them with support on an urgent basis. They handled all the on-ground distribution of relief materials by connecting with community members on the phone and they connected with women and families in the most remote tribal areas. They reached out to vulnerable groups and ensured that single, widowed, disabled, old, and survivors of gender-based violence and pregnant women had access to basic amenities.

Nirantar played a crucial role in bridging the information gaps that the frontline workers were experiencing while working closely with communities, whether regarding government schemes or myths doing the rounds on COVID-19 or making sure that relief workers had sufficient information to guard themselves from

the infection. Nirantar created pod casts in Hindi, Awadhi, and Bundeli dialects that could be shared and listened to offline, understanding that the majority of people do not have access to smart phones and the internet, especially women and girls. All the materials were created with a gender perspective, bringing focus on the impact of the lockdown and pandemic on women and girls.

Nirantar also created an on-line space for volunteers, teachers, and learners working in isolation and carrying out relief work despite their own challenges of domestic responsibilities and restricted mobility. ALE centre teachers shared their concerns that lockdown disruption will affect the progress made so far and there was high possibility of learners' skills lapsing at a faster pace. Thus, Nirantar took on the online space to renew its activities with teachers and learners and organise sharing and learning sessions every week to share materials and discuss pedagogical concerns in taking those learning materials to women and girl learners. A Whatsapp group was also created for teachers to ensure continuous supply of materials and practice exercises to reduce the chances of relapse among adult and adolescent learners.

This weekly platform also provided an opportunity for teachers and mobilisers to share their gendered experiences of being in lockdown and heightened levels of stress and violence that they are facing in silence. A letter written by one of the digital literacy teachers speaks volumes about the increased drudgery, surveillance, and control over women because of the lockdown. In this letter, she shared that despite her working hard to take care of 13

family members, her husband gets upset when she is on the phone undertaking relief work or conducting sessions with learners. He snatched her phone and now allows her to see it only if there is call or she requests for it. She has been suffering in silence and one space that she had for herself, the literacy centre, also does not exist anymore. She feels totally helpless and alone in her struggle.

The lockdown has shrunk the women's struggle of more than 7 decades. Women teachers, girl volunteers and learners are struggling again for the mobility and autonomy that they had recently earned by fighting, negotiating, and working hard for it. Now in times of lockdown, mobiles phones have become a new site of that struggle and autonomy. This provides them the chance to do things that they like and connect with other women and girls to keep their solidarity groups alive. Thus, this on-line space has become the new space of gendered control and struggle.

Unless women are equipped with digital skills and empowered with confidence to use them, they will be in the same position of marginalisation and vulnerability as before due to lack of literacy. Digital is the new language of capacity and ability to access rights and entitlements. Mobile phones and the internet have become the new sights of negotiating freedom and equality. Thus, we believe that digital literacy from a gender perspective, using feminist tools of analysis, is the way forward for ALE, though access to infrastructure and tools still remains a huge problem for women and girls, especially from marginalised and poor communities.

Visit <https://www.nirantar.net/> to know about Nirantar.

¹ Khullar, Akasnsa., (2020, April 9), Gender analysis missing from India's coronavirus strategy, Deccan Herald. Retrieved from <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/gender-analysis-missing-from-india-s-coronavirus-strategy-823349.html>

² This work has been carried out in partnership with BUDS, Action India, PACE (Delhi), SAKAR, SSK (Uttar Pradesh) and Women's Federations (Bihar)

For further information, please contact:
Medha Soni, ASPBAE Information and Communications Coordinator
Ph: + 91 (0) 9811699292 (New Delhi, India)
Email: medha.aspbae@gmail.com • Website: www.aspbae.org

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