CITIZEN'S PLATFORM
Working Paper

9

New Realities in the Education Sector Confronting the Disadvantaged Communities

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এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

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Abstract

Conventional narratives on COVID-19 impact and recovery gave greatly focused on healthcare support and vaccine supply chains. However, the education sector, especially in Bangladesh, has continually experienced both demoralising direct and indirect impacts on students as a consequence of COVID-19 led school closures. In line with this, the paper expands on the pandemic's impact on marginalised students according to their gender, level of education and the community they belong to. Moreover, this paper delves into how these vulnerable students have coped with school closures and the corresponding policy support received during the first wave of COVID-19. Findings reflect that primary-level, female and students based in climate volatile areas have disproportionately experienced higher learning disruptions. Which were, primarily, led by financial incapacities or child marriage. In terms of coping, higher-level students were found to be far more technologically equipped to cope with virtual school but were also the most likely to drop out of school. Given the challenges presented, students enrolled in cash support programs were far more likely to remain in schools.

About the Platform

Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh was formed in June 2016 with the objective of providing a policy stage to the non-state actors (NSAs) in Bangladesh to contribute to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Platform seeks to enhance transparency and accountability in the SDG process at the country level. It particularly aims to promote the 2030 Agenda's pledge to *Leave No One Behind* in the process of development.

Since its inception, the Platform has emerged as the largest forum for the NSAs that include a unique blend of non-government development organisations, civil society organisations (CSOs) and private sector associations in Bangladesh. The Platform currently has over 120 Partner Organisations. These organisations work on knowledge generation as well as monitoring of national development policies towards delivering SDGs by 2030. Moreover, the Platform undertakes policy advocacy and stirs new conversations on relevant challenges and solutions. All these are accomplished through regular conferences and dialogues at the national level, capacity development workshops, international events and webinars.

At the beginning of it journey five years ago, the Platform sought to outline the scope of the partnership between the government and NGOs and explore the role of the private sector in implementing the SDGs. It emphasised the importance of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) as central to the overall delivery of the 2030 Agenda. The Platform later provided intellectual inputs to identify the population groups at risk of being left behind in the attainment of the SDGs in Bangladesh. Subsequently, one of its highlighted focuses was youth, a systematically vulnerable community in Bangladesh in view of the country's journey through a window of demographic opportunity. The following years saw the Platform bringing together more than 50 Partner Organisations that actively contributed to documenting Bangladesh's progress towards attaining selected SDGs for review during the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). The Platform, along with a dozen of its Partner Organisations also prepared a set of thematic policy briefs with a view to contributing the perspectives of non-state actors towards the Voluntary National Review (VNR) of Bangladesh.

Since the scourge of COVID-19 unleashed itself in the first quarter of 2020, the Citizen's Platform realised the advantage and potential of its substantive network. It immediately engaged in conceptualising initiatives that could address the crisis and particularly uphold the interests of the "left behind". Thus, the year was marked by the Platform's many activities widely discussing the implications of COVID-19 at the grassroots level, on the SDGs, and on the pathways towards an inclusive recovery and resilience. Towards this end, the Platform along with its Partner Organisations embarked on a flagship research and outreach programme titled "Strengthening Citizen's Engagement in Delivering SDGs in view of COVID-19 Pandemic". A number of knowledge products will be created under the programme, to be followed by policy advocacy.

In view of the above, the Citizen's Platform has introduced a Working Paper Series, which will feature pertinent research on issues related to SDG delivery with a particular focus on the marginalised and vulnerable communities in Bangladesh. The present paper is the ninth of this series.

Series Editor: *Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya*, Convenor, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh

About the Authors

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Mr Towfiqul Islam Khan is an economist and currently a Senior Research Fellow at the CPD. He has undertaken various research and published in a number of areas including macroeconomic policies, fiscal policy and fiscal transparency, governance, financing for development, inclusive development and SDGs. Khan is a member of the 'SDG Working Team' constituted under the Prime Minister's Office, Government of Bangladesh. He is also a member of the 'SDGs NGO Sub-Committee' constituted under the NGO Affairs Bureau of Bangladesh. Khan received the Australian Leadership Award (ALA) in 2008 to carry out his post-graduation academic degree at University of Melbourne, Australia. Khan also obtained his Masters and Bachelors in the area of Economics from Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh.

Mr Estiaque Bari has completed his Master of Science (MSc) and Bachelor of Social Science (BSS) in Economics. He is currently serving as a senior lecturer in the Department of Economics at East West University (EWU), Bangladesh. Previously he worked with the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) as a senior research associate (SRA). He has a number of published journals and book chapters under his credit. In his seven years of professional career, Mr Bari has conducted several survey-based research analyses, both at the household and industrial levels. His current work broadly covers issues on Environmental Economics, Development Economics and Labour Economics.

Ms Najeeba Mohammed Altaf is an accomplished economic researcher with a great interest in macroeconomics and development policy. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in Economics and Public Administration from the esteemed University of Malaya and furthered her education with an MBA from the prestigious IBA, Dhaka University. Najeeba previously interned at Schlumberger's Financial Hub in KL, Malaysia, where she worked on their AP/AR reconciliation team. Her exposure to real-world financial practices and her academic expertise in economics have honed her skills and made her a well-rounded professional in her field. As an economic

researcher, Najeeba brings her extensive knowledge of macroeconomics and development policy to her work. She is dedicated to analyzing and addressing economic issues that affect people's lives, especially in developing countries. Her recent-most research work focused on examining the effectiveness of the GPEDC Development Cooperation principles at the sectoral level Asia, Africa and Latin America.

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Acronyms

a2i	Access to Information in Bangladesh
BANEBIS	Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BDT	Bangladeshi Taka
BIGD-PPRC	BRAC Institute of Governance and Development - Power and Participation Research Centre
CAMPE	Campaign for Popular Education
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
DPE	Directorate of Primary Education
ERD	Economic Relations Division
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GED	General Economics Division
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
MICS	Multiples Indicators Cluster Survey
MSME	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SSNP	Social Safety Net Programme
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VOA	Voice of America

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Pre-COVID-19 Context

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh had been making strides in the education sector. As of 2018, there are, reportedly, over 38 million students in Bangladesh. Of which, 9.5 per cent are in pre-primary,47 per cent in grades 1-5 (primary) and 34 per cent between grades 6-10 (secondary school) (BRAC, 2020).

The latest achievement gained within this sector have manifested in the forms of primary school enrolment rates for boys, which is at par with the world average of 92 per cent. Concurrently, the equivalent for female enrolment far exceeds the world average at 98 per cent (GED, 2021).

Concurrent to the near universal primary school enrolment rates is the reduction in primary school dropout rate. Which the 8th Five-Year Plan has highlighted as an enduring challenge, the halving of the rate from approximately 40 per cent (2010) to 18 per cent (2019) is a commendable achievement in and of itself. Between male and female primary school students, the rates have dropped from 40 per cent and 39 per cent to 19 per cent and 16 per cent, respectively (GED, 2021).

However, there are drivers besides attaining high enrolment and low dropout rates in schools affecting the education of children in Bangladesh. The first of which is the quality of education attained across levels of education and specifically at the primary school level. Recent figures show that more than half of primary school students in the country struggled when reading basic words. While more than 60 per cent were unable to recognise basic patterns and sequences.

The lacklustre quality of learning, inadequate stimulation and competencies attained at the primary level translated into overall lowered enrolment and completion rates at the secondary level. As of 2019, net secondary school enrolment hovered slightly above 50 per cent (GED, 2021).

While the actual completion rate of secondary school stood at approximately 64 per cent, even this figure was skewed towards males (GED, 2021).

Looking further within, the completion of upper secondary schooling stood at 65 per cent while completion of lower secondary schooling was less than 30 per cent (GED, 2021). The quality of education has been called into question as students are pushed to lean towards coaching centres, private tuition and rote learning as a means of "passing" school (GED, 2020).

In 2000, nearly 28 per cent of rural households and 48 per cent of urban households had been paying out of pocket for private tuition. The corresponding figures in 2010 were 54 per cent and 67 per cent respectively (UNESCO, 2021). For the poorest of the population, education expenses had increased four times while the overall average expenses had risen by 80 percent (UNESCO, 2021).

Beyond in-school factors, there are others that are keeping students out of the education system. The first emerges as the issue of child marriages. Skewed greatly towards underaged girls, as of 2017, Bangladesh has experienced a child marriage rate of 59 per cent, exceeding the global average by 38 per cent (GED, 2021).

Alongside child marriages, engagement in the labour force, often in hazardous conditions, has been plaguing Bangladesh's children for decades. Bangladesh's 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) employs the definition for child labour used in the Sustainable Development goals (SDGs) which defines child labour as the participation of children in economic activities or household chores beyond what is acceptable for their ages. As of the time of reporting in 2019, and according to this classification, the share of children (between the ages of 5 and 17) engaging in the labour force has stood at 6.8 per cent (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS); UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019).

1.2 Post-COVID-19 Issues

The COVID-19 lockdown-led disruptions in the education sector is what UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres refers to as a "generational catastrophe". A school disruption with the potential to undo decades worth of development progress and strengthening human potential. The pre-pandemic world had already been experiencing a weakened education system. Wherein records had shown that approximately 250 million children around the world had been out of schools indefinitely (VOA, 2020). Since the advent of the pandemic, findings report that more than 1.2 billion students are out of schools and a staggering 1.38 billion students have had their educational pursuits disrupted around the world (Li & Lalani, 2020). Which goes on to reflect that COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns have only exacerbated existent issues.

With the advent of the pandemic came the swift enactment of lockdowns and social distancing requirements across the globe. The combination of the two protection measures set the motion rolling for spill overs effects extending across all corners of socio-economic activity in Bangladesh.

The greatest impact of COVID-19 travel restriction on Bangladesh's education system materialised as one of the world's longest school closures. Coming in at the heels of the first COVID-19 infection spread and lockdown, schools across Bangladesh have closed their doors since March 17,2020 (Shampratik Deshkal, 2021). Making it one of the only 14 countries around the world and the only one in South Asia that has chosen to completely limit potential COVID-19 exposure to their students in any capacity in an educational institute for 61 weeks (UNESCO, 2021).

The immediate period after school closure started saw students and teachers alike treating it as a 'general holiday' as it was firstly named. Hence, the 'short' gap in education. Soon after which, education authorities and students realized that the general holiday was rapidly evolving into a prolonged lockdown. Which unless tackled, would result in the greatest disruption and resultant generational gap in terms of education.

On an institutional level, CAMPE's rapid response survey reveals that over 70 per cent of primary schools and below have had their operations disrupted because of the pandemic (CAMPE, 2020). Furthermore, 41 per cent of primary school students were affected by the school closure compared to a little over 30 per cent of secondary school students. Looking further within, both female primary and secondary school students had been disproportionately negatively impacted compared to their male counterparts (CAMPE, 2020).

While the school closures have aided in limiting the exposure of the nations' children to the virus, it had also kept them out of the education system indefinitely. Schools have since reopened in

September 2021, but the impact on students and teachers in the post-closure scenario remains to be seen (Dhaka Tribune, 2021).

Following the disruption in education and ensuing disproportionate impact on primary and secondary students alike, came the second biggest impact. The prolonged school closure left families with students with two major options to choose from: continue education within their financial limitations and institutional capacities or dropout from the school system.

Rise in school dropout rates and child marriages

Much like the rest of the global community, despite introducing a multi-faceted approach aimed at reaching students at all levels of school across Bangladesh, the pandemic has served to exacerbate pre-existing issues.

As was reported in 2018, there was a comparatively higher rate of dropout within the secondary level of education (37.6 per cent) as opposed to the 18.8 per cent in the primary level (Alamgir, 2020; GED, 2021). Viewing it from the gender perspective, historical figures report higher dropout rates within primary school boys compared to girls while the opposite holds true at the secondary level (Shilpi, Hasnayen, Ilahi, Parvin, & Sultana, 2017).

As for the reasons driving students out schools, the latest available Child Labour Survey reports that primary school boys were simply 'not interested' to continue school while girls' families couldn't afford it. At the secondary level, the reasons evolved into female students spending more time doing domestic chores while boys were forced into supporting their family income (Shilpi, Hasnayen, Ilahi, Parvin, & Sultana, 2017).

One of the greatest direct impacts led by the pandemic lockdown and subsequent school closure has been the spike in school dropouts. In a survey conducted in the early stage of the pandemic, a higher share of secondary school students (21 per cent) compared to primary school students (14 per cent) in urban slum and rural households were found to not be going to school at all (Rahman & Matin, COVID-19 Impact on Education Life of Children, 2020).

The intiail concerns that arose with the school closures was the disincentivising of school participation, especially among students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

According to officials in the Kurigram district, nearly 50, 000 children have dropped out of education completely due to the persistent school closure (Bebu, 2021).

Consequently, an indirect impact of one of the longest school closures in the world, is the rise in child marriages and its disproportionate effect on underaged girls. As is made apparent in the National Human Development Report 2021, the prolonged delay in education may increase the likelihood of marriage among young girls (ERD, 2021). In the early period of the pandemic, over 13,000 underaged girls had been reported as victims of child marriage. However, only 20 per cent of child marriages are formally reported (Sakib, 2021).

In more recent news, an estimated nearly 400 underaged girls from the Faridpur district have been coerced into marriage using fake registration forms (Kajol, 2021). While the pandemic may have

resulted in income instability and school closures, thus disrupting education. Seeking out economic stability through expedited marriages may still contribute to growing school dropout numbers. As is reported, the likelihood of married girls are four times more likely to discontinue their education compared to their unmarried counterparts (Karim, 2020).

Similarly, much like many nations across the world that have chosen to cut spending on education (as share of GDP) during the pandemic, Bangladesh continues to maintain a less than 2 per cent share of GDP for spending on education. Experts have reportedly mentioned that latest allocations for education expenditure do not reflect the changes or needs resulting from distance learning or virtual schooling (Ahmed, 2021).

Existing literature on COVID-19's impact on education has, for the most part, centred on highlighting learning losses and gendered impact among students. However, the impact extends far beyond these two dimensions to affect vulnerable communities as a whole, in a complex manner. The intersectionality of the COVID-19 impact is an aspect that requires further insight for the formation of effectively targeted interventions.

Interventions for education continuity

While physical classes have come to a sudden halt around the world in 2020, this might not have translated to a complete suspension of schooling as is. Countries around the world shifted their classrooms online, using platforms like Google Classroom and Zoom. Some countries have even chosen to implement their own e-learning platforms tailored to their specific needs. Examples of such platforms would include Bangalore's own BYJU 'Think and Learn' app and China's 'Tencent', both highly successful endeavours (Li & Lalani, 2020).

Alongside online platforms and apps, there have also been unconventional partnerships, such as the one formed by PBS SoCal and the Los Angeles Unified School District. Thus, paving the way for broadcast of localised school programs (Li & Lalani, 2020).

When Bangladesh first went into lockdown (or 'general holiday') in mid-March 2020, schools and all related education activities had also halted for an expected short period. However, as COVID-19 infections and fatalities rose, the lockdown continued, and school closures persisted. As of September 2021, Bangladesh has been declared as one of the 14 nations to have the longest school closure by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2021). During this period, there have a combination of state-run efforts to effectively mobilise virtual schooling, which can be classified under four clusters.

The first of which is broadcasting pre-recorded lessons through television. Which is what the government-run Sangsad TV has been doing since 29th March 2020 for secondary school students and then phased in for primary school students, in partnership with Access to Information in Bangladesh (a2i). According to the latest figures from December 2020, there have been a total of 2,100 classes aired out of the targeted 3,500. With an estimated total reach of 13.6 million students, there have been 501 lessons aired for primary students, 260 for madrasa students and 140 lessons for technical school students. Which together still does not outweigh the 1,260 classes broadcast for secondary school students (UNESCO, 2021).

The second approach comprised airing lessons through online platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. The Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) in partnership with a2i established and ran the "Ghore Boshe Shikhi" facebook page. Which broadcasted over 2,000 classes and had a total reach of nearly 10 million students. Additonally, there was a Konnect Facebook page and 'Konnect' Youtube channel. Which as of October 2021, has accumulated nearly 90, 000 subscribers averaging hundreds of views on each video. The combination of using YouTube and Facebook to continue lesson delivery has resulted in an estimated total of 90,000 classes, reaching nearly a million students each day during the first wave of the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021).

Reaching further to hard-to-reach areas or disadvantaged communities, were radio-based classes. The government-run "Bangladesh Betar" alongside 16 other community-run radio stations have taken the responsibility of broadcasting lessons five days a week for 45 minutes a day. Thus, reaching an estimated half a million students of varying classes in a single day. While the modes of virtual lesson delivery have been unilateral in nature thus far, there have been efforts of pushing interactive radio classes by a2i in partnership with the Directorate of Technical Education and UNICEF (UNESCO, 2021).

Moreover, there have also been dedicated e-learning platforms created to overcome the slump in education. MuktoPaath is one such online platform that offers over 180 courses for not just students but professionals and other members of society that may want to avail a course (UNESCO, 2021).

On a more targeted level, there have been platforms created for people with disabilities. One of which is the more recent "Emporia" platform that offers access to both a web-based portal and a mobile phone application. This platform caters specifically to the education and job application needs of a person with disabilities (UNESCO, 2021).

Finally, the more interactive options of schooling involve using state-run online platforms such as the one offered through 'Virtualclass.gov.bd' that allows teachers to create virtual 'classroom', assign assignments and conduct tests as well as take classes through their dedicated video-conferencing software. Outside of government initiatives, there are even third-party run platforms such as Google Meets, Google Classroom and Zoom that have been popular choices among private institutions.

Regardless of the wide array of choices when it comes to continuing education through virtual means, there are still a substantial share of students who have been left out. This may be attributed to the twelve-fold increase in out-of-pocket expenditure for education during the months of June 2020 to March 2021 (Tribune Report, 2021).

The combination of interventions accommodating for the differences and needs between and within communities have mitigated, to an extent, the deterioration of skills learning in students. According to a BIGD-PPRC survey, the findings show that secondary school students were far more involved in virtual schooling than their primary school counterparts. Where attending classes through TV broadcasts was more common among primary students, secondary school students were more active in school through online classes (Rahman, et al., 2021). The survey findings also make a distinction between students residing in urban and rural areas. However, between the two, online classes were found to be the most prominent approach to continuing school during the lockdown (Rahman, et al., 2021).

Alternatively, seeking out a more tailored approach to address specific requirements, many private

schools and universities established their own modes of virtual class delivery. Many opted to unilaterally deliver lectures through YouTube and Facebook. This approach was proved to be the most popular, given its accessibility. Latest figures show that there have been over 90, 000 classes conducted via these platforms, reaching nearly a million students a day during the first year of the pandemic (CAMPE, 2020). While others relied on the likes of Zoom and Google Classroom to maintain a participative classroom experience (BRAC, 2020)

Learning losses

While the reach of the interventions is impressive, the extent of learning among the students is still under review. In this connection, CAMPE's research finds that across the varying levels of education, students could only 'partially' engage in their schooling process (CAMPE, 2020). With inadequate engagement with the students, even teachers have reflected their hesitance with the extent of learning achievement during the pandemic. Majority of surveyed teachers have maintained that it may only be 'partially possible' for students across the board to truly learn or even be assessed adequately via virtual platforms (CAMPE, 2020). In the midst of struggle for both teachers and students, Bangladesh had shortened the syllabi as a means of reforming both the curriculum and assessment by 2023 (UNESCO, 2021).

Unsurprisingly, there are other challenges present that impede the potential progress of education continuity through distance learning. Among both rural and urban areas, these challenges manifest due to parents simply not having the capacity to support their children through home-schooling. In this vein, CAMPE's survey finds that the majority of their respondents (i.e., the parents of students) were illiterate, and thus, were unable to teach their young children at home (CAMPE, 2020). Even within homes in rural areas that had access to televisions, only a quarter were found to actually use it to attend classes. An even slimmer proportion of students who had access to internet were likely to use the internet to attend any online classes (Asadullah, Bhattacharjee, Tasnim, & Mumtahena, 2020).

Thus, existing literature shows that despite classes broadcasted via TV may provide the needed ease of accessibility and availability for continuing education, the implementation of such programs is impeded by both a digital divide and the prevalent household or parental understanding and capacity.

One such study, BRAC's rapid assessment survey derived underlying reasons exacerbating the potential discontinuation of education among children. The first of which was addressed as the "lack of direction from school". This is referred to as the institutional capacities of directing home-based continuation of school. The second is identified as the looming food crisis within the respective families of the students. Food insecurity in conjunction with income insecurity during the pandemic may have the forced the hands of many parents to prioritise food expenditure over education. The final of the top three reasons outlined for not continuing classes at home is that these students were not supported by their family members (BRAC, 2020).

For all the efforts of facilitating distance learning, more than 50 per cent of children (aged 5-15) had no access to television. This was much starker for the poorest households, of which approximately 91 per cent had no access to television (UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, for those students who were provided the support, to continue education through either electronic media or online platforms, their families had been further burdened financially during the pandemic. As mentioned earlier,

there had been a steady rise in the share of households relying private tuition to overcome lack of conventional schooling in the pre-pandemic period. Thus, adding further to education expenses borne by households. As of 2019, the household expenditure on education in Bangladesh stands at 3.7 per cent of GDP, higher than both the world and South Asia (UNESCO, 2021).

1.3 Rationale, objectives and methods

The present chapter's aims to establish a baseline of information regarding Bangladesh's education sector during the first wave of COVID-19. While earlier surveys and studies have explored the impact and COVID-19 coping dimensions with regard to the country's education system, this chapter assesses the individual and household-level impact and coping mechanisms as well as an assessment of policy support in view of Bangladesh's education sector during COVID-19 from three vantage points:

(i) The perspectives of the traditionally and newly disadvantaged communities. These, essentially, comprise those communities who were identified as vulnerable pre-pandemic and those who've become vulnerable because of the pandemic.
(ii) The level of education comprising the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of schooling.
(iii) The gender perspective

In this connection, the chapter uses a combination of statistical analyses for evidence-based interpretation[1] and desk research of secondary literature. The primary data used for empirical analyses is sourced from Citizen's Platform's 2021 field survey, "Strengthening Citizen's Engagement in Delivering SDGs in view of COVID-19 pandemic" .[2]

1.4 Layout of the Chapter

Beginning with introduction, the paper expands into COVID-19 impact on Bangladesh's education sector (section 2), the subsequent institutional and household level COVID-19 coping mechanisms (section 3). Following which, section 4 seeks to highlight the growing digital divide while section 5 outlines the public policy responses in support of the education section. The final section 6 consolidates the findings of the previous sections and sheds light on the short- and long-term implications across the dimensions.

2. FRAMING ISSUES IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

The preceding section presented a thorough literature review of the post-pandemic developments and concerns emerging from within the education sector in Bangladesh. The present section sets out to highlight the foremost concern, both on an individual student and the household level, that comes with a prolonged suspension of schooling across the nation. As has mentioned earlier, Bangladesh had imposed one of the longest school closures in the world, totaling a period of 61 weeks (UNESCO, 2021). Such a drawn-out disruption in classes has been estimated to induce nearly 24 million school dropouts from a pre-primary level to university (UNESCO, 2020).

Citizen's Platform surveyed a total of 1,811 students across Bangladesh in February 2021. Out of this sample, primary students and below comprise 45.2 per cent while secondary school students

[1]Please refer to .

[2]Please refer to methodology in chapter 1.

make up 38.4 per cent. It must be noted – "primary and below" refers to primary and pre-primary school students.
As can be seen in the following Table 2.1, both secondary school and college level students are 2.6 times likely to drop out of schools in a post-COVID-19 scenario compared to students at the primary level or below. Among the sample of primary school students, students from slum areas have exhibited the highest likelihood of dropping out of schools once they reopen in the 'post COVID-19' era.

Unlike the overarching group of secondary school students, there is a drastically higher potential of secondary students from coastal areas dropping out of education completely (8.7 per cent). Moreover, this share is comparatively higher not just within secondary schools' students of vulnerable groups but across the levels of education. At the collegiate and higher levels of education, students from the char areas are at the most at risk of leaving the education system once educational institutes reopen.

Among the individual communities, coastal area students are at most risk of being excluded from the education sector in Bangladesh in a post-COVID-19 scenario. The coastal community form part of the larger traditionally disadvantaged group, which is also at a comparatively higher risk of experience of overall rising drop-out rates.

Table 2.1: Potential discontinuation of education (%)

Groups	Primary	Secondary	College and Above	Overall
Traditionally Disadvantaged				
Char	0.0	2.6	33.3	2.6
Haor	0.0	3.4	5.0	1.9
Coastal	0.0	8.7	0.0	3.0
Slum	3.4	5.7	6.3	4.4
Dalit	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Indigenous	0.9	1.8	0.0	1.6
PWD	3.0	4.2	0.0	2.8
Newly Disadvantaged				
Migrants	0.0	1.6	2.6	1.1
MSME	1.2	3.5	4.9	2.9
All	**1.3**	**3.4**	**3.4**	**2.5**

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021

On a gender-disaggregated level, more female than male student respondents have replied that they may no longer pursue an education even if schools reopen. The potential rise in students dropping out of the education system altogether may have been referred to as one of the direct impacts of COVID-19 on the country's education sector. However, there have been many other indirect impacts driving students out and keeping them out of schools.

2.1 Impact at the household level

The previous section had delved into the impact on an individual level. The following subsection presents and explains the various dimensions of impact that a vulnerable household may have experienced in connection with education during the pandemic. The disrupting impact on education is analysed according to individual groups within the broader classifications of traditionally and newly

disadvantaged as illustrated in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2: COVID-19 impact on education at the household level

Groups	Share of households with currently enrolled students (%)	Share of households with at least a member is participating in virtual classes (%)	The incremental cost of participating in virtual classes at the household level (BDT) per month	Share of households with the possibility of a member to discontinue education due to COVID-19 (%)
Traditionally disadvantaged	**67.8**	**14.3**	**343.0**	**2.8**
Char	74.0	6.8	410.0	3.0
Haor	77.0	7.8	350.0	3.0
Coastal	78.0	28.2	342.0	4.0
Slum	60.8	15.2	303.0	3.8
Dalit	65.0	10.8	229.0	0.0
Indigenous	72.7	15.6	397.0	2.0
PWD	62.2	13.9	374.0	2.9
Female HHH	59.9	21.8	411.0	1.7
Newly disadvantaged	**72.0**	**21.0**	**410.0**	**2.3**
Migrant	70.1	22.8	395.0	1.0
MSME	70.3	21.1	382.0	3.0
All	**68.8**	**15.8**	**363.0**	**2.7**

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021.

Within the traditionally disadvantaged group, the 'Coastal' community is found to have the highest per cent of households with students enrolled in schools and participating virtually. However, this same group also has the highest per cent of households with the potential to drop out of education due to COVID-19. The coastal communities have been previously recognised as not only being the most vulnerable to climate change but consequently, socially vulnerable. These communities are, primarily, dependent on making their living based on climate-centric work such as fishing and agriculture (Chowdhury, 2008). The resultant high exposure to vulnerabilities may add to the growing caution and need to build income streams rather than continue with education in the long-term. Which may be recognised as one of the underlying reasons as to why coastal communities have the highest share of potential dropouts in the post-pandemic era.

The 'char' community, based entirely in the rural areas, may not have the lowest per cent of households with students enrolled in schools, but they do have the lowest share of households with students in virtual school. Coincidentally, these households from the char community experience the second highest incremental cost of participating in virtual school at BDT 410 a month.

Following closely are female-headed households experiencing the highest incremental cost (411 BDT/month) but also have the second largest share of households with students participating in virtual school (21.8 per cent).

Among the newly vulnerable, migrant and MSME households have comparatively similar experiences in terms of shares of households with currently enrolled students. However, there are a slightly higher

per cent of households among the migrants with students participating in virtual school (22.8 per cent) and a resultant comparatively higher incremental cost (395 BDT/month). Despite a comparatively lower incremental cost resulting from virtual schooling, the per cent of MSME households with the possibility of discontinuing education remains at a higher than average 3 per cent.

The overarching context sets the basis of virtual participation in schools of varying vulnerable groups as well as the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic on education. One of which was the dropping out of school due to financial inability. One may wonder whether differences in household income may have any relevance to virtual school participation. The following section outlines the varying methods through which households and students have coped with schools being closed around the country.

2.2 Identifying the underlying reasons driving the dropout rate

The section, thus far, has identified the extent of the potential dropout rates prevailing within disadvantaged communities in Bangladesh. The following subsection draws the various reasons underpinning the potential decision keeping a student out of school, given the circumstances of the pandemic. In this regard, the Citizen's Platform survey proceeds to identify three major reasons driving the dropout rate. The first of which is that they may not have had the finances to afford an education as a result of the economic instability during the pandemic. Consequently, the financial instability during the pandemic resulted in an influx of youths joining the workforce instead which has been identified as the second reason. The third is that they may have gotten married during the pandemic which may be barring them from going back into education.

Table 2.3: Why the traditionally and newly disadvantaged students may not continue once the school reopens

Underlying Reasons	Traditionally Disadvantaged			Newly Disadvantaged		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
Financial inability	41.2	52.6	47.2	100.0	50.0	66.7
Joined in a work	58.8	15.8	36.1	-	-	-
Got Married	0.0	31.6	16.7	0.0	50.0	33.3

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021.

As can be seen in Table 2.3 above, the primary reason why students who are dropping out or are planning to is because of financial restrictions. A greater share (nearly 67 per cent) of newly disadvantaged students have dropped out due to insufficient funding. However, the share of traditionally disadvantaged students (47 per cent) who've faced a similar demise is not minor by any measure. The economic instability brought on by the pandemic has instilled a sense of caution with regard to smoothing consumption. In this connection, marginalised communities and especially girls are more vulnerable to cutting costs, particularly in relation to education.

Moreover, between income instability and school closures, many children have been forced to earn additional income for their families. While there are no students from within the newly disadvantaged that have dropped out of school due to joining the workforce, 36 per cent of the traditionally disadvantaged students have had to drop out because they'd gotten employed. However, there is a higher share of newly disadvantaged students who've dropped out due to getting married during the pandemic. What becomes worrisome with a closer look at the gender disaggregated figures is that across both traditionally and newly disadvantaged, girls are far more disproportionately impacted by

marriages and subsequent suspension of their education during the pandemic.

3. COPING WITH THE DISRUPTION IN EDUCATION

The earlier sections delved into the direct and indirect forms of impact, including prolonged disruptions to classes and exacerbated dropout rates across levels of education, between disadvantaged groups and at the household level. The present section examines virtual school participation across levels of schooling and between disadvantaged groups, as is illustrated in Table 3.1. However, for those students and households who were able to overcome the trappings that came with pandemic shocks, they coped with the disruption through distance learning, when and where possible.

3.1 Virtual school participation

Among the traditionally disadvantaged primary school students, the coastal population had the highest share of students participating in school virtually (14.5 per cent). However, within the communities rural-based (i.e., the char and haor areas), virtual primary school attendance was found to be non-existent.

A deeper analysis into the relationship between geo-locations and the likelihood of coping with distance learning reflected that location has significant impact on the student's chances of partaking in virtual lessons. In particular, students from traditionally disadvantaged households in urban areas are more likely to leverage technology and the internet to attend school. This, however, does not hold true for students in newly disadvantaged households. What this may indicate is that households and schools in urban areas are much more well equipped to take on virtual modalities for schooling in comparison to their rural counterparts

This does not apply to secondary school and college, where slightly over 15 and 5 per cent of char and haor secondary students were in virtual school, respectively. While the corresponding attendance rates, respectively, were 16 and 15 per cent in college and above. Among the traditionally disadvantaged secondary school students, 25 per cent of secondary school students from slums were found to be in virtual school. Which was lower in comparison to newly disadvantaged students, where over 30 per cent of secondary school students from migrant households were attending classes virtually. Overall, only 12 per cent of enrolled students were participating virtually.

Overall, when observing across levels of education, it can be clearly observed that the overall attendance rate in virtual primary school was the lowest (3.1 per cent) in comparison to secondary (16.8 per cent) and collegiate (25.3 per cent) levels of education.

With a deeper analysis into virtual school participation and its underlying driver, the type of school or institution the student is enrolled in has been found to have a significant impact on students' chances of continuing school virtually. Among traditionally disadvantaged students, this likelihood increased when the student was enrolled in a public institution compared to students from private schools and universities. Students from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds, are more likely to be in government schools compared to private institutions as evident in the higher proportion of students that have been surveyed in this study who are in public schools. For those that do go to private schools, those institutions may not have the required funding to execute virtual classes. Among the

Table 3.1: Virtual Class Participation Rate (%) by Level of Education and by Groups (%)

Groups	Primary			Secondary			College and Above			Overall virtual class attendance rate (%)
	Total enrolment	Virtual class attendance	Virtual class attendance rate (%)	Total enrolment	Virtual class attendance	Virtual class attendance rate (%)	Total enrolment	Virtual class attendance	Virtual class attendance rate (%)	
Traditionally disadvantaged										
Char	71	0	0.0	38	6	15.8	6	1	16.7	6.1
Haor	83	0	0.0	59	3	5.1	20	3	15.0	3.7
Coastal	62	9	14.5	46	11	23.9	27	11	40.7	23.0
Slum	207	7	3.4	123	31	25.2	32	9	28.1	13.0
Dalit	45	2	4.4	39	3	7.7	13	3	23.1	8.2
Indigenous	112	4	3.6	165	20	12.1	91	17	18.7	11.1
PWD	67	1	1.5	48	5	10.4	27	6	22.2	8.5
Newly disadvantaged										
Migrants	85	2	2.4	64	20	31.3	39	12	30.8	18.1
MSME	86	0	0.0	115	18	15.7	41	13	31.7	12.8
All	**818**	**25**	**3.1**	**697**	**117**	**16.8**	**296**	**75**	**25.3**	**12.0**

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021.

newly disadvantaged students, the situation was slightly different. The findings show that a newly disadvantaged student in a madrasah were significantly more unlikely to pursue education online or through alternative virtual means. This may be a result of the institutional priorities or incapacities that are an impediment to the adoption of distance learning.

As to how students from vulnerable households have participated in virtual school, the following section provides a deeper look into the modes of coping with learning during COVID-19.

4. DIGITAL ACCESS: PROBLEMS IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

The path to adapting to online or virtual schooling has to take account of the existing digital divide and the limitations experienced by many communities, especially the left behind and pushed behind, across Bangladesh. In a country where, reportedly, there is less than 40 per cent smartphone penetration, virtual schooling may become an expensive endeavour. Moreover, the latest figures by BANBEIS show that 76 per cent of students in rural areas were unable to avail classes via television compared to 55 per cent of urban residing students. In terms of online classes, rural-based students fared comparatively weaker with nearly 94 per cent of students unable to access online classes compared to 30 per cent of their urban counterparts (Shujon, 2021). Overall, urban students fared far better in terms of digitally accessing classes compared to their rural peers (Shujon, 2021). The following Tables 4.1 and 4.2 outline the various modes and devices that were used to adapt to virtual education from the traditionally disadvantaged and newly disadvantaged perspectives.

Table 4.1: Modes of Virtual Participation (% of traditionally disadvantaged)

Modes	Primary	Secondary	College	All
Interactive	4.4	44.3	60.0	43.4
Social Media	13.0	31.7	20.0	25.0
Television	56.5	6.3	0.0	11.8
Mixed	26.1	17.7	20.0	19.7
Devices				
Smartphone	100.0	100.0	96.0	98.5
Laptop/desktop	0.0	0.0	4.0	1.5

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021.

Table 4.2: Modes of Virtual Participation (% of newly disadvantaged)

Modes	Primary	Secondary	College	All
Interactive	50.0	39.5	28.0	35.4
Social Media	0.0	47.4	44.0	44.6
Television	50.0	5.3	0.0	4.6
Mixed	0.0	7.9	28.0	15.4
Devices				
Smartphone	100.0	100.0	88.0	95.2
Laptop/desktop	0.0	0.0	12.0	4.8

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021.

4.1 Modes of virtual school participation

In view of the traditionally disadvantaged experience, the vast majority (56 per cent) of primary school students were able to continue education virtually through television. While the least used mode was the 'interactive' mode. The interactive medium of online education comprises online platforms that accommodate for real-time discussions and follow up between the instructor and students. However, the television approach does take into the consideration the limited smartphone penetration within the country, the non-reciprocal nature of it may make it difficult to gauge the true learning experience.

Contrary to the traditionally vulnerable primary students' experience, the majority of traditionally disadvantaged secondary school students (44.4 per cent) participated in school through online, interactive medium. While only 6.3 per cent continued their education through television.

In the newly disadvantaged' experience, however, there is an equal division between the primary school students who've continued school through online, interactive mediums and those who've continued through television. Among the secondary school students, 47 per cent of them were found to use social media (such as Facebook and YouTube) as their mode of choice for online education.

Overall, within the students who've chosen to go online, smartphones dominated as the device of choice across both traditionally and newly disadvantaged students at both primary and secondary levels of education. Laptops and desktops were much more commonly used among students at the collegiate and higher levels of education but were not as popular as smartphones across both traditionally and newly vulnerable groups.

4.2 Cost of virtual school participation

As mentioned in the preceding section, the transition of shifting to online or virtual school may oftentimes be expensive and consequently, become completely unfeasible. The following Table 4.3 showcases the monthly increment in costs incurred due to virtual or online schooling. Among the traditionally disadvantaged, the Dalit community is found to experience 1.3 times more than the

Table 4.3: Incremental cost of online class participation (in BDT)

Groups	Primary	Secondary	College and Above
Traditionally Disadvantaged			
Char	0.0	258.3	500.0
Haor	0.0	216.7	483.3
Coastal	187.5	303.0	340.9
Slum	250.0	260.7	351.1
Dalit	300.0	300.0	333.3
Indigenous	285.0	309.8	378.4
PWD	0.0	270.0	353.3
Newly Disadvantaged			
Migrants	100.0	340.6	395.8
MSME	0.0	322.2	380.8
All	**227.7**	**296.0**	**374.8**

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021.

average increase in costs of both traditionally disadvantaged and newly disadvantaged primary school students together. While they may have had the second highest virtual primary school attendance rate during the pandemic, it was only 4.4 per cent compared to the much higher 14.5 per cent attendance of coastal area based primary school students. Despite coastal area based primary school students having the highest virtual school attendance, they've also had the lowest increase in cost (187 BDT per month).

Among the newly disadvantaged, the secondary school students from migrant households incurred the highest rise in costs due to virtual school (340 BDT per month). However, this may have been a consequence of them having the highest virtual school attendance rate among the entire group of secondary school students.

In short, the highest increment in cost is incurred by college and higher educated students from Char areas. The rural area based tertiary level students' clock in one of the lowest virtual attendance rates, yet experience nearly 1.3 times more the average increase in cost.

Table 4.4: Average Household income by those who participated online vs those who did not

(Significance test)

Groups	Did not participate in online classes	Participated in online classes	P-value
Traditionally Disadvantaged	**14754**	**17712**	***
Char	9373	11800	
Haor	15162	22717	**
Coastal	15518	15409	
Slum	12880	15319	**
Dalit	11220	14643	
Indigenous	11148	21966	
PWD	15444	20263	*
Female HHH	17880	25265	**
Newly Disadvantaged	**25008**	**24000**	
Migrants	28770	30566	
MSME	20469	17048	
All	**16947**	**19602**	**

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021.

The Table 4.4 above sheds light on the results of significance tests held as regards the differences in household incomes of the students who are participating in school virtually and those who aren't. Comparing traditionally disadvantaged and newly disadvantaged, there is an observed significant difference in the incomes of households that participate in virtual school and those that don't. Within the newly disadvantaged, there are no observed differences that are statistically significant. However, this doesn't apply to the vulnerable groups within the traditionally disadvantaged. Within which, households with significantly higher incomes in char areas, slums and the female-headed households were found to be participating in virtual school. Following closely, is the difference in incomes of households with persons with disabilities. What may be inferred is that increases in household incomes of these specific areas may influence whether their students are able to support virtual schooling.

However, whether there is any true impact remains to be assessed. The increment in costs resulting from virtual school participation can be assessed from the share that it occupies within the household incomes of respective groups.

Table 4.5: Incremental cost of online participation as a percentage share of current monthly income

Groups	Incremental cost of online participation as % of current monthly income
Traditionally disadvantaged	**2.4**
Char	4.4
Haor	1.6
Coastal	2.4
Slum	2.4
Dalit	1.9
Indigenous	2.5
PWD	2.8
Female HHH	2.3
Newly disadvantaged	**2.7**
Migrants	1.9
MSME	3.0
All	**2.5**

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021.

The Table 4.5 above details the per cent share of monthly incomes occupied by the incremental cost of virtual schooling. The rise in costs for the newly vulnerable is higher than both the traditionally disadvantaged's 2.4 per cent share and the overall share of 2.5 per cent by 0.3 and 0.2 per cent respectively.

However, it is within the traditionally disadvantaged group that households based in the Char areas experience the highest incremental cost per monthly income share (4.4 per cent). Despite the Char and Haor regions being completely rural based, the Haor region incurs the lowest share of incremental cost to monthly income (1.6 per cent).

4.3 Reasons driving down virtual school participation

While monthly household incomes and incremental costs have been referenced, thus far, as one of the major proponents of discouraging virtual schooling among students from vulnerable households, there still remains a multitude of drivers beyond the financial aspect. The following subsection takes a deeper look into the various reasons underpinning the rising.

For those students who've been left out of the virtual school experience completely during the pandemic, the following Tables 4.6 and 4.7 present the underlying reasons.

Across the board, both the newly and traditionally disadvantaged experienced a rise in virtual school participation with a rise in the level of education. However, a higher per cent of traditionally disadvantaged students (89 per cent) have dropped out during the pandemic led school closure, a little over 4 per cent more than newly disadvantaged students.

Table 4.6: No online participation and why (% of traditionally disadvantaged)

	Primary	Secondary	College and above	All
No online participation	**96.5**	**84.8**	**76.9**	**89.0**
Why?				
No institutional arrangement	87.5	78.49	82.32	83.59
Lack of device	12.5	20.14	14.02	15.43
Poor internet Connection	0	0.46	0	0.16
High internet expense	0	0.92	3.66	0.82

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021.

Table 4.7: No online participation and why (% of newly disadvantaged)

	Primary	Secondary	College and above	All
No online participation	98.8	78.8	68.8	84.9
Why?				
No institutional arrangement	93.5	89.2	96.3	92.3
Lack of device	5.9	10.1	3.7	7.2
Poor internet Connection	0.6	0.7	0.0	0.6
High internet expense	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021

Both disadvantaged groups cite the lack of arrangement by the institution as their primary reason for being unable to pursue education virtually. The second reason lies with the lack of laptops, smartphones or even a TV. Where 1 in every 14 newly disadvantaged households couldn't participate due to a lack of device compared to 1 in every 6 traditionally disadvantaged households. Following which, more newly disadvantaged secondary students report that slow internet or poor internet coverage has been deterring them from an online education. However, more traditionally disadvantaged students list the high cost of internet services as their third major reason for not attending online school.

Regardless of all the reasons listed, the core responsibility, as presented by the survey results, remains with the educational institution and their initiatives to push for students to continue education virtually.

5. EXPLORING PUBLIC POLICIES IN EDUCATION DURING COVID-19

Before the pandemic had disrupted the education sector, disadvantaged students had already been struggling keeping up with their schooling, finding employment whilst having no effective access to necessary public services (Moazzem & Shibly, 2020). As the previous section has outlined, there may have been a slew of coping approaches that had allowed disadvantaged students to overcome the impact on their education. Regardless, the pandemic had been difficult for students, teachers, and institutions alike in terms of continuing classes and assessments through distance learning mediums all whilst combatting rising dropout rates.

While the budget allocation for education had risen in the FY2021-22 National Budget, the reality is that the share had dropped from 12.2 per cent in the previous year to 11.9 per cent for 2021-22.

Correspondingly, the country's public spending on education had largely hovered at 2 per cent of GDP in 2019 (GED, 2021).

According to UNESCO, the household expenditure on education (as a share of GDP) far exceeded this by 1.7 per cent (UNESCO, 2021). This is indicative of the value placed in education through out-of-pocket expenditure before the pandemic. Since its advent, this has only, reportedly, increased a staggering twelve times (Tribune Report, 2021). The value on education emphasised through private expenditure should have materialised through public spending especially during the pandemic. Given the range of initiatives incentivising school participation and targeting education continuity, the budget allocation for the education sector may not fully be cognisant of the burgeoning digital divide, rising dropout rates and child marriages.

The following section uses the responses gathered though the Citizen's Platform's 2021 field survey to assess the extent to which disadvantaged households have enrolled in and received support through 'social safety net programs' (SSNPs). In this regard, the analysis differentiates between cash-based and in-kind support-based government support programs and whether the vulnerable households are enrolled in them.[3]

Considering the differentiation between the SSNPs , the analysis further considers transfers targeting students across all levels of education, disabled students and those who've dropped out. The results show that 2 out of every 11 disadvantaged households are enrolled in a school related SSNP and have received support during the pandemic.

Table 5.1: Share of households that have received SSNP support by level of education and by gender (%)

	Female	Male	All
Primary	30.3	21.8	25.9
Secondary	13.2	11.7	12.5
College & above	11.3	6.4	8.4
All	**20.6**	**15.3**	**17.9**

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021.

Table 5.1 sheds light on the gender perspective, which shows that female enrolment in and support from education-based SSNPs outweigh their male counterparts (i.e., there are at least 1.3 times more females receiving education specific support compared to males). This is particularly curious given that a higher proportion of female students compared to male students have responded that they will not be re-joining schools in the 'post-pandemic' era.

Moreover, 1 in every 5 traditionally disadvantaged households has received education specific support through SSNPs during the pandemic compared to 1 in every 8 newly disadvantaged household. Among the levels of education, there are at least three times more households enrolled in primary school focused SSNPs that have received support compared to those in SSNPs targeting tertiary level students.

[3]Cash-based transfers would include all the stipends and allowances provided to students and respective households; while in-kind transfer encompasses the food assistance programs, rations, relief activities and other non-cash-based forms of support targeting disadvantaged sects of society. Moreover, it considers whether the enrolled vulnerable households received any overall support through the social safety net programs during COVID-19.

Further analysis reveals that enrolment in a cash-based program raises the likelihood of a student from a traditionally disadvantaged household going to virtual school by 4 per cent. The statistically insignificant impact of in-kind transfers may be attributed to the school feeding programs being temporarily suspended or awaiting approval during school closures. The primary intent of such programs was to incentivise students to stay in school and maintain class attendance, which became difficult to ensure during the pandemic.

6. FINDINGS AND POLICY PERSPECTIVES

The analyses presented in this paper, thus far, provide insight into the implications of COVID-19 on the education status of vulnerable communities from three vantage points:

(i) the direct and indirect impacts with regards to the continuity of education,
(ii) the means of coping with distance learning and
(iii) the social safety net programs promoting and incentivising school attendance.

During the first wave of the pandemic, the education experience of students, teachers and institutions alike included resuming classes and exams with as much normalcy as possible. Alongside the continuation of classes was redesigning assessment modalities and reducing the potential of a student dropping out. The following observations were derived from the collated literature and findings of this paper, and are presented, primarily, in view of the traditionally and newly disadvantaged community perspectives and experiences of virtual schooling.

In current discussions, there are aspects beyond the mainstream issues that have not been broadly addressed.[4] First of which is the monitoring issue. While there have been a comprehensive set of remote learning initiatives in the country, the process of monitoring lesson dissemination and its effectiveness at the primary and secondary levels is yet to be publicised.

In line with the lack of information is the issue of `data hesitancy' beyond the 'data gap'. Where government agencies have the capacity to collect required data and are doing so, but which are then not released for public viewing. Without a relevant and timely national database, the need for evidence-based policy making is further pushed behind.[5]

In line with the first dimension, the present study finds that, broadly, students in higher than primary levels of education are far more likely to discontinue their education in the "post-COVID-19" world. Among the individual groups themselves, students based in coastal areas have the highest potential of being left out of education completely. On a gender disaggregated level, more female respondents have stated their intent to discontinue their education even if schools return to normal.

Driving forth these choices endangering the education of thousands, if not millions, of students across Bangladesh are three core reasons. Out of which, the major reason driving both classifications of disadvantaged students out of school is financial inability. COVID-19 exacerbated financial instability has only grown to put the education of girls' at risk where the alternative choice is to have them

[4]Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh held a conference on "Bangladesh Emerging from the Pandemic Coping Experience and Policy Choices" on 12-13 December 2021.

[5]Specific comments addressed the latest version available of the National Student Assessment Survey from 2017 and only for grades 3 and 5.

married off. Which is what the study finds as a disproportionate share of girls from vulnerable homes have been married off and consequently, put their education on hold indefinitely.

In connection with the second dimension, for those students who hadn't been pushed out schools, options comprised either self-study or distance learning. Ironically, while primary school students were found to be less likely to drop out of schools in the post-COVID-19 world, a deeper analysis into the relationship between the level of schooling and virtual school participation showed that the likelihood of students to participate in virtual school rose with the level of education. And against this backdrop, the survey's findings show that both secondary and tertiary level students from are significantly more likely to continue education virtually compared to their primary school counterparts.

The lower virtual school participation on part of primary school students may be attributed to a couple of reasons. One of which is that children in primary schools require guidance from either a teacher or a parent. For vulnerable households, this may be a major factor discouraging the online education for primary school students. The other reason may be the widespread understanding that as students' progress across levels of schooling and as they grow older, their adaptability to technology improves as well. This may also be attributed to the increased attention towards tertiary level institutions with regards to equipping them technologically during the pandemic. As such, colleges and universities may have been much better equipped to deliver virtual classes and assessments compared to primary and secondary schools.

However, the extent of coping with distance learning is encompassed within the households' ability to accommodate digital requirements and the institution's ability to provide the needed during the school closures. Among primary school students, the most popular mode of "attending" classes was through television broadcasts. Which is much more one-directional in approach compared to the preferred interactive modes popular among secondary and tertiary level students. Regardless of the various modes of classes, smartphones were the most commonly used device among both traditionally and newly disadvantaged students across all levels of education.

Given the modes of participation and device of choice, the households surveyed experienced an average 2.5 per cent incremental cost as a share of their monthly income. Of which, the newly disadvantaged experience higher than average incremental cost. However, despite experiencing higher than average increase in costs due to virtual schooling, there was no significant difference in the household incomes of newly disadvantaged students who've 'gone' to virtual school and those who haven't, which is unlike the situation among traditionally disadvantaged households.

A deeper look into the relationship between the ability to reduce one's household expenditure and the likelihood of a student in that household to be in virtual school, unveiled the following. Traditionally disadvantaged households that had the capability of reducing household expenditures and did so during the pandemic had students who were more likely to be in virtual school or be in schools that had the capacity to accommodate for distance learning. This aspect did not, however, apply to students and households from newly disadvantaged communities.

While the differences in incremental costs and respective household incomes have been considered thus far as some of the few major reasons driving down virtual school participation, another reason emerged as far more influential. For both traditionally disadvantaged and newly disadvantaged

students, the 'lack of institutional arrangement' was overwhelmingly cited as the major reason for not continuing one's education online during the COVID-19 school closures.

Finally, in line with the third dimension, the current survey's results reveal that female students, primary school students and students from LNOB households have been, primarily, on the receiving end of support through social safety net programs.

Existing literature makes the case that disbursement of cash support may diminish chances of dropping out of school as it would help cushion the added expenses resulting from virtual school. In alignment with this, the survey's findings reflect that traditionally disadvantaged students who were enrolled in cash -based education programs were far more likely to be participating in virtual classes compared to newly disadvantaged students. Which may be attributed to the confidence that families with students enrolled in cash based SSNPs may have when faced with the need to compensate for incremental costs resulting from online schools.

In view of the experiences and challenges emerging in the country's education sector during the pandemic, the way forward will need to comprise addressing the education institutions, teachers, and the students. Students that had been surveyed, across the board, had listed a lack of institutional arrangement as their major impediment in continuing classes during the lockdowns. Considering prolonged nature of the pandemic, blending the virtual and physical class experience is important.

It may be rather obvious that, given the pandemic's impact and the necessity to move into "distance learning", improving institutional capacities will be the first and foremost priority. In this case, this would comprise creating and effectively using e-learning platforms while making supplementary study materials available online. For teachers, this would entail the creation of a training module to guide rigorous training in terms of enhancing their adaptability to shifting classes and assessments to an online medium. As for the students, given the findings of the chapter thus far, being able to afford to attend classes via digital devices has emerged as a concern. In this connection, a cash-based transfer program tailored to address the needs and requirements of a student from a vulnerable home may decrease the likelihood of them dropping out of school. For students who live in hard-to-reach areas, the Government of Bangladesh should be able to leverage NGOs and their capacities to deliver lessons and assessment modules to these geographically disadvantaged students.

Regardless of how many more waves of COVID-19 the world may face, the expectation that disaster may strike anytime should not diminish. Repeated extensions of school closures may support the containment of the virus but may also just add to the deterioration of a child's development, especially in terms of their learning capabilities and social skills.

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ANNEX

The chapter uses an econometric exercise via STATA to assess the impact on the likelihood of virtual school participation of a student from a traditionally and newly disadvantaged household.

Given that a student can either participate in school through virtual means or not at all during the school closure, two probit regression models has been employed for students from both types of disadvantaged households.

The overarching explanatory/independent variables that are common for both models used in this exercise include the gender and age of the survey respondent. The level of education and type of institute they had been enrolled in. Followed by whether their respective households resided in urbanised areas or otherwise and whether they had to reduce their household expenses. Additionally, the variable regarding whether the student respondent would continue going to school once institutes reopened was included in both model 1 and 2.

The difference between the two is based on Model 1 including whether the respective households of the students surveyed were included in cash-based or in-kind based social safety net programs.

Model 2, however, includes whether that family received support through these programs during the pandemic.

In this connection, model 1 employs the following:

$Prob(Y_i = 1) = \Phi(\alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Gender_i + \alpha_2 Age_i + \alpha_3 Age\ Squared_i + \alpha_4\ Secondary_i + \alpha_5 College\ and\ Above_i + \alpha_6 Government_i + \alpha_7 Madrasa_i + \alpha_8 Urban_i + \alpha_9 Reduction\ in\ HH\ expenditure_i + \alpha_{10} Cash\ SSNP\ received\ during\ COVID\text{-}19_i + \alpha_{11} In\text{-}Kind\ SSNP\ received\ during\ COVID\text{-}19_i + \alpha_{12} Education\ Continuation_i + u_i)$..(i)

While Model 2 is as follows:

$Prob(Y_i = 1) = \Phi(\alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Gender_i + \alpha_2 Age_i + \alpha_3 Age\ Squared_i + \alpha_4\ Secondary_i + \alpha_5 College\ and\ Above_i + \alpha_6 Government_i + \alpha_7 Madrasa_i + \alpha_8 Urban_i + \alpha_9 Reduction\ in\ HH\ expenditure_i + \alpha_{10} Recieved\ SSN\ support_i + \alpha_{12} Education\ Continuation_i + u_i)$..(ii)

Where Y_i refers to either a traditionally or newly disadvantaged student's likelihood of participating in virtual school.

Annex Table 1: Explanatory Variables of Probit Regression

Variables	Description
Gender	= 1 if the student respondent is male;
	= 0, if female
Age	Age of the respondent
Age Squared	Squared value of the respondent's age
Secondary	= 1, if student respondent was enrolled in secondary school
	= 0, if student respondent was enrolled in primary school
College and Above	= 2 if student respondent was enrolled in college and other higher educational institutes
	= 0, if student respondent was enrolled in primary school
Government	= 1 if student respondent was enrolled in a public institute
	= 0, if enrolled in a private institute
Madrasa	= 1 if student respondent was enrolled in a madrasa
	= 0, if enrolled in a private institute
Urban	= 1 if student respondent's household resides in an urban area
	=0, otherwise
Reduction in HH expenditure (%)	= 1 if household reduced their overall household expense (%)
	= 0, if otherwise
Cash SSNP received during COVID-19	= 1 if household was enrolled in and received government cash support through SSNP
	= 0, if otherwise
In-kind SSNP received during COVID-19	= 1 if household was enrolled in and received government in-kind support through SSNP
	= 0, if otherwise
Received SSN support	= 1, if SSN support was regularly received during COVID-19
	= 0, if otherwise
Education Continuation	= 1 if student respondent desired to continue education after schools reopen
	= 0, otherwise

Annex Table 2: Average Marginal Effects from Probit Regression Models 1 and 2

Dependent Variable: Virtual School Participation during COVID-19

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Marginal Effects			
	Traditionally Disadvantaged	Newly Disadvantaged	Traditionally Disadvantaged	Newly Disadvantaged
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Male (=1)	-0.00235	-0.0159	-0.00461	-0.0158
	(0.0162)	(0.0325)	(0.0164)	(0.0320)
Age	0.0216**	0.0533	0.0206**	0.0537
	(0.0103)	(0.0350)	(0.0105)	(0.0343)
Age squared	-0.000366	-0.00146	-0.000355	-0.00147
	(0.000305)	(0.000992)	(0.000308)	(0.000974)
Secondary (=1)	0.100***	0.156***	0.0967***	0.157***
(Primary, Base=0)	(0.0238)	(0.0519)	(0.0233)	(0.0514)
College and Above (=2)	0.107***	0.226**	0.104***	0.225**
(Primary, Base=0)	(0.0402)	(0.0985)	(0.0397)	(0.0970)
Government (=1)	0.0553***	0.0518	0.0610***	0.0500
(Private, Base=0)	(0.0197)	(0.0427)	(0.0195)	(0.0419)
Madrasa	-0.0335	-0.121***	-0.0346	-0.119***
(Private, Base=0)	(0.0251)	(0.0314)	(0.0241)	(0.0313)
Urban (=1)	0.0904***	-0.0527	0.0839***	-0.0485
(Rural, Base=0)	(0.0181)	(0.0326)	(0.0179)	(0.0319)
Reduction in HH expenditures (%)	0.00108**	0.000955	0.00111**	0.00104
	(0.000493)	(0.000842)	(0.000499)	(0.000822)
Enrolment in Cash-based SSNP	0.0416*	0.0541	-	-
	(0.0225)	(0.0553)	-	-
Enrolment in In-kind based SSNP	0.0330	-	-	-
	(0.0659)	-	-	-
Education Continuity (=1)	-	-0.0336	-	-0.0374
	-	(0.103)	-	(0.101)
Received SSN support during COVID-19	-	-	0.0116	0.0987
	-	-	(0.0272)	(0.0782)
Observations	1,345	426	1,345	430

Annex Table 3: Probit Coefficients from Probit Regression Models 1 and 2

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Probit coeff	Probit coeff	Probit coeff	Probit coeff
A7	-0.0140	-0.0824	-0.0274	-0.0829
	(0.0968)	(0.169)	(0.0972)	(0.169)
A8	0.129**	0.277	0.123*	0.282
	(0.0621)	(0.182)	(0.0630)	(0.181)
A8sqr	-0.00219	-0.00759	-0.00211	-0.00773
	(0.00183)	(0.00517)	(0.00184)	(0.00514)
7.edu_new	0.651***	1.125**	0.621***	1.152**
	(0.159)	(0.514)	(0.153)	(0.513)
13.edu_new	0.682***	1.389**	0.654***	1.411**
	(0.224)	(0.626)	(0.218)	(0.623)
2.A12	0.319***	0.248	0.348***	0.243
	(0.115)	(0.206)	(0.113)	(0.204)
4.A12	-0.266	-1.022**	-0.278	-1.006**
	(0.222)	(0.399)	(0.217)	(0.397)
urban	0.541***	-0.273	0.499***	-0.254
	(0.110)	(0.172)	(0.109)	(0.170)
expdrop	0.00646**	0.00495	0.00661**	0.00547
	(0.00294)	(0.00443)	(0.00296)	(0.00438)
ssnp_cash	0.249*	0.281		
	(0.134)	(0.287)		
ssnp_kind	0.198			
	(0.394)			
A18		-0.174		-0.196
		(0.534)		(0.534)
A124			0.0692	0.518
			(0.162)	(0.410)
Constant	-3.324***	-4.137***	-3.173***	-4.199***
	(0.485)	(1.270)	(0.504)	(1.259)
Observations	1,345	426	1,345	430

Annex Table 4: Share of Households that received government supports by types and by groups (%)

Groups	No	Cash support only	Food assistance only	Other-in kind support	Multiple supports
Char	81.6	1.0	15.3	0.0	2.0
Haor	90.7	0.0	6.2	0.0	3.1
Coastal	70.8	2.1	11.5	0.0	15.6
Slum	49.8	1.8	29.8	0.5	18.2
Dalit	28.3	0.0	34.3	0.0	37.4
Indigenous	51.7	3.3	22.0	1.7	21.3
PWD	55.5	0.7	24.1	-	19.7
Female HHH	66.1	1.3	19.3	-	13.3
Migrant	89.8	1.1	5.4	-	3.8
MSME	77.9	0.4	13.2	-	8.5
All	**62.8**	**1.3**	**20.1**	**0.4**	**15.3**

Source: Citizen's Platform Field Survey 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic, undoubtedly, upended the way the global, regional and national systems had operated. And among the ravages wreaked by the pandemic, the education system had been greatly impacted, with prolonged school closures spelling out direct and indirect consequences for students across Bangladesh. This working paper explores the varying consequences of COVID-19 on students, particularly the marginalised, in view of school closures, resultant coping mechanisms and policy support. By highlighting the unequal impact on education across the country, this working paper underscores the importance and urgency for prioritising students from traditionally and newly disadvantaged as well as communities in a crisis.

Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh
এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

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