

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted on global efforts to ensure that all children receive quality education. Pakistan is no exception. School closures to limit the spread of COVID-19 have directly impacted an estimated 40 million school-going learners from pre-primary to higher-secondary levels, in a context where school enrolment, completion and quality of learning are already low, especially for girls.

To understand the extent of the issue and to develop a body of evidence to inform future policy directions, UNICEF Pakistan has supported a study on “Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 on Education in Pakistan”, focusing particularly on learning losses due to school closures and the measures taken to support learning for school-going children.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), Pakistan, conducted by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) is the country’s largest citizen-led household-based survey and aims to provide regular, reliable estimates of education status and learning outcomes of children aged 5–16 years in rural districts of Pakistan. After the unprecedented school closures of 2020 and early 2021, the ASER study in 2021 was adapted to measure the impacts of COVID-19. The survey was conducted in 16 rural districts of Pakistan (four each in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh provinces). A total of 9,392 households with 25,448 children aged 3–16 years were surveyed, including 21,589 children aged 5–16 years (43 per cent girls, 57 per cent boys). Using ASER tools mapped to Sustainable Development Goal 4.1.1.a, learning assessments for language (English and Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto) and arithmetic competencies was conducted for children aged 5–16 years. Additionally, 457 government schools and 198 private schools were surveyed to assess their capacity and readiness to adhere to government guidelines on safe school reopening.

The districts included in the survey are Quetta, Bolan, Gwadar and Awaran from Balochistan; Peshawar, Chitral, South Waziristan and Torghar from KP; Muzaffargarh, Sheikhpura, Bhakkar and Jhelum from Punjab; and Karachi-Malir, Sukkur, Tharparkar and Dadu from Sindh.

Key findings

- Learning levels are highest in surveyed districts of Punjab, followed by KP and Sindh, and are lowest in Balochistan, while learning losses are highest in surveyed districts of Balochistan, followed by Punjab, Sindh and KP. Low-performing and high-performing districts on the Alif Ailaan ranking from 2017 have experienced the greatest learning losses.
- Girls experienced greater learning losses than boys during the COVID-19 school closures across nearly all competencies and classes. This served to halt or even reverse an existing increasing trend in learning outcomes for girls who had, in some cases, outdid boys.
- Children who attend government schools show greater decline in learning than private schools during the period in which school closures occurred. These declines are particularly acute in lower classes (Classes 1 and 3).
- Learning outcomes improve with maternal education and with household wealth.
- About 60 per cent of children currently enrolled in school spent less than an hour a day on their studies during school closures.
- While 40 per cent of children with smartphones in the home used these for learning, younger children receive less time to access these than older children. 55 per cent of children do not feel confident to study on their own if school closures reoccur.
- About 32% of children reported that they watched educational broadcasts through PTV's Tele-School programs. While Tele-School's outreach is notable, its impact is unclear. The study also reveals that among households with access to television, 54.5% responded to not have used PTV Teleschool as a support to children's learning. This illustrates the differences that exist between individuals and social groups not only in terms of access to technologies but also in terms of their capacity to benefit from the use of technology, with low 'digital literacy' and/or low "digital motivation".
- Social Protection outreach to HHs increased from 2019 to 2021 for the sixteen districts from 10.4% to 11.4% through the BISP, Ehsaas, Punjab Social Protection Authority (PSPA) and Akhuwat programs. Given the expansion of targeted social protection instruments for education over COVID-19 period from early years to primary, secondary and post-secondary, this could be an important linkage to offset learning and access deprivation to those most in need (ensuring at least 50% are girls) through a lifelong approach.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study shows that school closures have led to a learning crisis for primary-school children. Younger children who have not yet built a foundation for learning, are more vulnerable to learning losses. Pakistan's crisis of learning is rooted in a deeper crisis of equity, girls as well as children from lower wealth backgrounds and certain geographical regions suffer the greatest learning losses in Pakistan.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

- Policies and programmes must be devised to support the learning of all children and focusing on young children and girls.
- The factors that lead to education inequities must be tackled, such as through social protection programmes for girls' education and targeted support for children in the poorest households using low-tech and no-tech modalities.
- A new social compact for learning is needed to build connections between families, communities, and schools to collectively support children's schooling.
- EdTech should be explored for its potential to provide solutions for innovative learning.