

COVID-19 and Woes of Online Education in the Global South

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The education system in the developing world is marred by several challenges such as dearth of qualified teaching staff, inadequate infrastructure facilities, and lack of government spending on the sector, amongst others. These challenges have been exacerbated by COVID-19 which made online education a necessity. Closure of schools, colleges and universities compelled governments to impose widespread lockdowns and as a direct corollary, traditional means of education had to be abandoned and innovative means adopted. In other words, educational pursuits had to be shifted online to ensure that students' academic years were not wasted. However, owing to the abysmal state of education in the developing countries, they were ill-equipped to meet the demands of online education.

To start with, hi-speed Internet is relatively new (and in many cases not that hi-speed at all) in the poverty-stricken Global South. In fact, it is considered a luxury in countries where people struggle to make ends meet. A case in point is Bangladesh where Internet penetration was a mere [28.8%](#) in January 2021. The picture is equally bleak in Pakistan where it was [27.5%](#) during the same period. Access to the Internet is one of the basic requirements of online education without which the latter becomes a chimera.

Additionally, while the global North is racing to introduce 5G technology, the impoverished masses of the Global South are still struggling with painfully slow Internet connections.

Reliable and considerably fast Internet connectivity is the lynchpin of online education. Due to frequent signal disruptions, students are unable to effectively attend and participate in their online lectures. This also greatly hampers them from grasping difficult concepts and interacting with their teachers. Perennial power outages are also impediments to online education in developing countries, so even if one has a computer and an Internet connection, power cuts mean that one may not be able to attend or participate in class or group discussion.

Furthermore, pervasive poverty in the developing countries is another conspicuous reason impinging upon online education. In Pakistan, students, mainly from the poorest families are provided "[conditional cash grants](#) of Rs. 1,500 for boy child and Rs. 2,000 per quarter for girl child on attainment of 70% attendance in school." Such initiatives are introduced in a bid to encourage children in impoverished areas to attend educational institutions. However, in the [absence of such initiatives](#), pressure on low-income families is debilitating. Thus, poverty imperils children marred by hunger and hardship from attaining online education.

Online teaching was a mammoth challenge for teachers in developing countries as well who usually rely on outdated or traditional means of instruction. In fact, an overwhelming number of teachers – especially those working in public sector educational institutions had never used a computer before online education became a necessity because of COVID-19. They struggled with basic issues like setting up the hardware, installing software and even maintaining discipline in online classes.

Making the matter more intractable is the fact that most educational institutes in the developing world lack the requisite financial resources and technical acumen to support online education systems. There is a dearth of funds needed to purchase software programs, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams (amongst others) which have become vital for conducting online classes. Additionally, educational activities remained suspended altogether in some fund-starved and badly managed educational institutes in the developing world for the duration of the lockdown. This essentially means that [millions](#) of children were deprived from exercising their basic right of attaining education.

Lastly, online education had a lopsided impact on girls. Lockdowns reinforced traditional gender roles - girls were expected to carry out household chores and look after their family members. In places where girls lack agency and access to resources, even if a household has an Internet connection and a computer, preference is usually given to boys. Hence, [girls have been suffering disproportionately](#) from the impact of COVID-19 on education.

In a nutshell, the transition towards online education during the pandemic has been difficult for developing countries. However, to maintain pace with advancements in the Global North, the developing world must take prudent measures to introduce best practices in its education system. Some of these measures could include teachers' training; introduction of latest mobile education apps given that mobile usage remains relatively more widespread even in poor households and increasing government spending in the education sector. While it may be an uphill battle to revamp the education system in poor countries, the future of millions of young minds depends on getting this done right.

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