Impact of COVID-19 on Education with Special Focus on Vulnerable Groups

Policy Paper
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Pakistan is a country which has been struggling since long to minimize educational disparities. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these disparities. The digital education response along with the prevailing digital divide in the country resulted in learning poverty particularly for vulnerable groups of students. Keeping in view the pandemic impact on education, this study presents the response of the federal government and the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa along with the effectiveness of this response on education for children from disadvantaged groups, including Afghan refugees. No specific measures were taken to engage Afghan refugee children in learning during school closures. Identifying the gaps in education response, the study suggests ensuring access to technology, financial support for the deserving students, and redressal of data gaps in order to device a national education emergency policy.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Educational disparities, digital divide, School closures, KP government response, Afghan refugee children
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1. Introduction

Access to quality education remains a global concern, particularly during the unprecedented era of COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has compelled approximately 77 million children across the world to stay away from their classrooms for a period of 18 months whereas 131 million children were unable to rejoin their schools for at least 9 months (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund 2021). Globally, school-age children have lost 1.8 trillion hours during the lockdowns amid the pandemic. It was a matter of grave concern for the countries like Pakistan where the number of out-of-school children (OOSC) is already very high, as Approximately 32% children aging between 5-16 are not enrolled (Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey 2019-20; Zaidi 2020). These figures confirm that Pakistan has one of the most substantial out-of-school per centage in the world, so the situation demands the imposition of an educational emergency.

![Figure 1: Trend in Out-of-School Children (5-16 years) in Pakistan](image1)

Figure 1 reflects the slow progress on OOSC between 2014 to 2020 where only 01% decline was observed during this period. The situation worsened in 2019-20 compared to 2018-19. This impact can be attributed to lockdowns. In addition, limited access to technology for the purpose of education during the COVID time and deteriorated economic condition of households increased the delayed return to schools.

When it comes to inter-provincial comparison of OOSC, the figure 2 below shows that all the provinces marked good performance except Sindh where the number of OOSC remained the same between 2014 and 2020. However, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and the Punjab reflected a slight decrease in the number of OOSC during that period.

![Figure 2: Provincial Progress on Out-of-School Children (5-16 years) between 2014 and 2020](image2)

Socio-economic disparities along with supply side issues are the existing barriers for accessing universal education in Pakistan. On supply side, pupil-school ratio declines from 258 at primary level to 123 at secondary level. Gender gap in number of schools is another concern, as 44% schools (primary-secondary) are for boys compared to 28% for girls and remaining 28% are with co-education (Pakistan Education Statistics 2018). Lack of facilities and
learning materials in schools, poor attendance of teachers, malnutrition, negative cultural norms practices, and gender discrimination have worsened the situation. It is a fact that the pandemic has exacerbated these issues, leading to high levels of educational inequalities, and thereby deepening the existing educational crisis. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) has witnessed even more critical learning loss, which in addition to its own population, has been hosting 58% of registered Afghan refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021). Roughly, five million schoolchildren were affected by the pandemic in terms of school attendance in KP (Jabeen & Malik 2020). A smaller percentage of students having access to smart phones and internet partially availed online learning programmes since the pandemic outbroke. For a majority students, the process of learning was severely interrupted as many dropped out, contributing further to the existing high level of out-of-school children (32%) in the province (Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey 2019-20).

KP is the province with educational disparities even before the pandemic. According to Pakistan Education Statistics (2018), the dropout rate among female students was 74% compared to male students. As many as 69% are dropped before completing their secondary school education. Similar situation of gender disparity is reflected in PSLM 2020, as 40% of the girls aging between 05-16 compared to 20% of the similar age group are out-of-school in KP. Data of target districts shows that Peshawar and Nowshera are behind with 61.6% and 67.9% respectively in terms of Net Enrolment Rate (NER) at primary level whereas relatively better situation has been reported in Haripur with 81.5% NER (KP Education Monitoring Authority 2020). Similar to the NER, Peshawar reported highest dropout among the target districts at primary level, i.e. 48% followed by Nowshera (35%) and Haripur (20%) (Education Atlas 2018).

According to Pakistan economic Survey (2021), these statistics combined with lower level of educational budget (i.e. 2.3% of GDP) implies that there is an inadequate progress towards Sustainable Development Goal-4 (Quality Education). The commitment to achieve the goal by 2030 is part of the transformative promise of ‘Leaving No One Behind’, as it is representative of the inexhaustible commitment of all UN member states to eliminate poverty in all aspects, end discrimination and exclusion, and decrease the inequalities and vulnerabilities. The pandemic has widened the gap as extensive school closures in Pakistan first began from March 2020 (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund 2021). Data on inadequate online learning and the long gaps before the reconfiguration of physical education suggests that students from vulnerable groups have borne a relatively higher cost of school closures. As a result, the overwhelming evidence of Learning Poverty, defined as “the share of children, who do not learn to read and understand a simple text by age 10”, (Gevin and Hasan 2020) supports the claim that vulnerable student groups have been the most adversely affected.

Within the context of the pandemic, this study provides a situation analysis of the pandemic impact on education and learning losses followed by a discussion as to how much effective is the role of state in the provision of education, specifically to disadvantaged groups, including Afghan refugees, children living in rural communities, girls, and people with disabilities.

2. Education of Vulnerable Groups during COVID-19

2.1. Impact on Afghan Refugees

A significant portion of Afghan diaspora can be found in Pakistan, as the country has hosted over 1.4 million registered and an estimated one million unregistered Afghan refugees (Amparado et al. 2021). With the recent Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and formation of a new government furthered with large-scale displacement of Afghans has triggered the migration of more than 300,000 refugees to Pakistan for shelter (Gul 2021) which will put more pressure on the available resources.

The pandemic effect on education outcomes for Afghan refugees is evidently more adverse. Revisiting the historical context of Afghan settlement in Pakistan is of paramount importance to form a plausible judgment.

2 Haripur, Nowshera, and Peshawar are the target districts of GIZ-EHS project https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/100816.html
While those who seek asylum in Pakistan may be the beneficiaries of social support provided by the development organisations, however their temporary legal status continues to serve as a serious impediment to academic and career progression of children and youths. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Pakistan has provided Afghan refugee learners an access to free primary and secondary education in certain areas through 153 schools, 48 satellites classes, 55 home-based girls schools and 13 early childhood education centers in refugee villages. The KP government has allowed refugee students to get admissions in the government’s primary and secondary schools.

In the light of status quo, COVID-19 caused mass disruption to refugee livelihoods in villages and urban areas during lockdown periods as roughly 80% of registered Afghans account for daily wageworkers. In view of COVID’s financial impact on refugees, household breadwinners are less likely to send their children back to school even after their re-opening. The most compelling statistics suggest that a big number of refugee children has not been able to engage in remote learning due to technology barriers. Lasko (2021) finds that:

“Internet access, tablets, laptops, and cell phones currently serving as stopgap classrooms for millions of children throughout the world are much harder to access from within refugee communities.”

The same happened to Afghan refugee children in Pakistan since they were no exception to this phenomenon. Consequently, these challenges caused an increase in OOSC rate, risk of child labour, early marriages, and gender-based violence among refugees. Madrasas or religious seminaries also become an option for the poorest households and refugee population, often when the state fails to provide other alternatives. In these seminaries, children are not only convinced to enrol (Singe 2001) with the promise of a kind of education but also provided clothes and food, which is big attraction for the poor parents. Another key impact of the pandemic on education outcomes has undoubtedly been the acute loss to refugee girls’ education.

These challenges also need to be contextualized with other factors, including dropouts due to the internal migration/resettlements of Afghan refugees from rural to urban centers, growing number of refugee children compared to the insufficient schools, and language barriers (Jahangir and Khan 2021).

2.2. COVID-19 and Geographical Disparities

At the onset of the pandemic, the extent of knowledge and awareness regarding safety measures and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) within rural communities in Pakistan was ambiguous and insufficient in comparison to the country’s miniscule upper middle class and urban populations (Hashim 2021). Notably, majority of the poorest reside in rural areas with very little access to vital utilities and substantially lower literacy rates. This has widened the rural-urban gap. Indicators of disparities in access to educational opportunities in rural areas include enrolment and dropout rates, learning outcomes, supply side indicators, including availability of basic facilities. For instance, learning losses have been more severe for children, who are marginalized, geographical location being one of the main factors. As reported by Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2019, more than 40% students of grade-5 in rural areas are unable to perform basic competencies compared to around 30% students from urban areas. According to a World Bank report (When Water Becomes a Hazard) published a year before the pandemic, “the poverty head count rate in rural Pakistan was twice as much in urban areas, i.e. 36% versus 18% respectively”, and this gap is unvaried since 2001/2002 (Ahmed 2018). As highlighted in PSLM 2020, rural areas lag behind in terms of NER at primary level as it is 62 (rural) as compared to 70 (urban). Similar situation prevails in KP as rural NER is 63 compared to 75 in urban. In a rapid situation analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on rural communities, it was revealed that “the education routine of children has been disturbed, with 52% of households reporting that children spend lesser time studying. “Only 37% of participants stated that children spent their time on studies during the pandemic (Rural Support Programmes Network 2020).

Accelerated reliance on virtual education across the country exposed severe digital inequities for rural children with no alternate ways, thus a presumable number was steered towards assisting with responsibilities at home or informal labour to gain extra income. Unfamiliarity with digital literacy, especially in internet dead rural zones
was also realised, strengthening the idea of the rural-urban divide. He newly merged districts (NMDs) faced these issues with more severity as only 38% households have television sets (Annual Status of Education Report 2019) and only 7% have internet connection as the area had restricted internet access due to security reasons in the past. In addition to the infrastructural limitations, gender digital divide is another concern as cultural restriction on women and girls to have internet access (Rehman, Kamran & Khan 2021). All these factors resulted in disrupted or no access to education during the pandemic particularly for students in rural areas and NMDs.

In such a situation, even those who returned to rural public schools were met with challenges while trying to follow SOPs. Hand washing, wearing masks, social distancing and other preventative guidelines are only possible to implement in the presence of suitable services such as spacious classrooms, clean water and sanitation and good educational infrastructure (Rajper 2021). It is widely accepted that these investigations reveal not only a sharp drop in enrolment rates but also expose the lack of effective classroom management strategies to support the continuation of learning for rural children. Without infrastructural support tailored to the nature of the pandemic, academic losses were inevitable in terms of creative skills and abilities.

2.3. Impact on Girls Schooling

Girls’ access to education in Pakistan is a protracted and intersectional issue stemming from the several forms of disadvantages (Khalid and Shah 2021). Education is universally conceived as the bedrock of social change, however in Pakistan, there were already stark gender disparities in this area before the pandemic. Annual School Census of KP (2021) reported 57% NER for girls at primary level compared to 77% for boys. District level data reveals similar pattern in select districts, as in Peshawar, primary NER for girls is 49% compared to 73% for boys; in Nowshera, this figure is 60% for girls and 75% for boys. The gender gap is relatively better in Haripur as primary NER for girls is 77.6% compared to 85.3% for boys (ibid). Only 59% girls in Pakistan (Pakistan Education Statistics 2018) and 63% in KP (Annual School Census 2021) can complete their primary education compared to 67% boys at national level and 83% in KP.

Essentially, the pandemic made these disparities even more acute. Malala Fund’s detailed report “Girls’ Education and COVID-19” delves deeper into COVID-19’s impact on education outcomes for young girls. Key findings suggest that while girls residing in the interior districts of Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were less likely than boys in those areas to say they would absolutely return to schools, girls living in urban centres in Balochistan were five times more likely to report that they were unsure of returning to school. Girls were more likely than boys to “cite withdrawal of parental permission” threatening reenrolment prospects. (Malala Fund 2020) The pandemic re-established prevalent perceptions about girls’ education not leading to economic uplift, specifically for marginalised and poor households, disproportionately directing educational investments towards boys.

Differences in educational investments also occurred due to harmful practices, such as early marriages and school closures; there was a further extension of “time poverty” for adolescent girls, who after a certain age, are forced to marry rather than study further (Zilanawala 2013 and Bari et al. 2020).

Similarly, the movement of girls from underprivileged backgrounds tends to be closely monitored, for instance, internet access and usage is restricted for many resulting in very little social exposure and poor skill development and enhancing the dropout rate. For adolescent girls of this stratum whose continuity of learning was disrupted, the educational trajectory was then associated with performing household chores and helping with traditional income-generating activities. The health implications due to increased domestic violence are important to consider. While physical distancing and stay at home strategies help fight COVID-19, these have simultaneously given added power to abusers and offenders of gender-based violence. A report by Sustainable Social Development Organisation (2021) highlighted that violence against women and rape cases doubled in the last six months of 2020, with maximum cases of child abuse occurring in the Punjab followed by Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to a report of Aurat Foundation released in 2020, over 190 cases were reported from five districts of KP in 2020 with the highest percentage (64%) in Peshawar district. Physical and psychological harm
caused by domestic violence is a deterrent to children, i.e. girls being interested in going to school and leading productive lives.

2.4. Impact on Persons with Disabilities/Differently abled People

Persons with Disabilities are one of the largest minority groups in the world and even before the pandemic. Reports reveal that they faced limited access to the educational facilities, frequently separated from their regular peers. Thus, educational opportunities remain out of reach for majority of them. Record shows that 371,833 persons with disabilities are registered in the country (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2021) and the absence of actual updated data on number of schoolchildren with disabilities leaves us without any clue of the extent of the problem. KP’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has provided the data of number of disabled students by disability types in Annual School Statistical Report and latest figure is 25,365 students with various types of disabilities.

Students with disabilities are subject to multiple barriers, stigma, and discrimination against them and continue to be the most excluded in education systems worldwide. The abrupt transition to remote learning has certainly confronted the parents of differently abled children to tackle unique barriers, as they are less likely to be equipped with appropriate vocational tools to help their children, causing a developmental delay. Additionally, the lack of assistive technologies has proven to be disadvantageous for those with speech, language, visual and hearing impairments, affecting the educational performance of these individuals. To that end, whilst with the subject of digital technology, there is a lower probability rate for disabled persons than those without a disability to state that they have a high level of confidence in their ability to use the internet (Schaeffer 2020).

As far as the learning process of special students is concerned in Pakistan, it was observed that this group was more anxious about online classes than their non-disabled peers, especially apprehensive about advancing to the next class. Mental health challenges for disabled people were also relatively greater due to the enormity of living in isolation. For instance, those who are physically incapacitated, isolation from external surroundings and being confined to learning vis-à-vis standard gadgets was tremendously challenging. Correspondingly, autistic children also had higher mental health conditions due to restricted participation in social skill activities. (Nasir and Hameed 2020)

3. National and Provincial Education Responses to COVID-19 and their Implications for Vulnerable Groups

The initial response to COVID-19 from the Government of Pakistan was Teleschool initiative - a channel on the state-owned broadcaster: Pakistan Television Corporation. The channel was launched nationwide within one month after the school closures in March 2020 with the broadcast content for grade 1-12. The Federal Ministry of Education and Professional Training also initiated text messaging system with 250,000 subscribers to inform the students about the timetable of Tele school, and also developed promotion criteria for grades 9-12 in the wake of extended lockdown.

Similarly, Elementary and Secondary Education Department, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, also taken a few initiatives:

• KP Learning Portal providing the learning material in Urdu and local language (Pashto), along with the worksheets to engage students during lockdown (http://kplearning.kpese.gov.pk/)
• Online Teacher Training Certification  (https://pkmypass.americanboard.org/mypass/default/registration.action)
• Virtual Teachers Q/A Forum for students, parents and public to strengthen the concepts of Chemistry, Biology and Mathematics (https://virtualteacher.kpese.gov.pk/)
• Official YouTube Channel with video lectures of different subjects of grade 1-10.
• Collaborated with the partners for “Learn Smart Pakistan” that is a gamified education platform (https://www.
All these responses played significant role in the continuation of education during school closures but the digital divide in Pakistan along with other factors, including socio-economic limitations, posed certain implications for the vulnerable groups to be discussed in next sections.

3.1. Efforts for Education of Afghan Refugees

No specific education response was reported by the government to engage Afghan refugee children in learning during school closures in Pakistan. The aforementioned ed-tech responses made Afghan refugees more vulnerable to the educational crisis as refugees are 50% less likely to access the technology (Grandi) particularly for girls. Another aspect of these ed-tech responses is the language issue as Urdu content of Tele-school makes it difficult to learn for refugee children. Similarly, the absence of targeted response also implies that the already economically-disadvantaged segment of the society would require focused efforts to prevent the expected dropouts particularly refugee girls as mentioned by the Malala Fund Report or bring dropouts back to schools.

There are various attempts and programmes by development partners as well as government for the education of Afghan refugees. These efforts can be categorized as:

- UNHCR run schools
- Registered refugee children enrolled in government schools across Pakistan, in addition to many skills development and scholarship programmes for the youth (Agency 2021).
- Schools established by the Government of Pakistan for Afghan refugees (33117 Afghan School Children 2021). (99 such primary level schools were established in five districts of KP)
- Self-help interventions, (as refugees have started their own private schools.)
- Accelerated Learning Programs (ALP) for female refugees, who have no access to education (mentioned by Commissioner Afghan Refugees, KP in a panel discussion, 2021); Refugee Girls Worldwide—a Canadian-based organization—is also running the 14 ALP Centers in KP
- Introduction of technology in schools to make it an integral part of refugee education (mentioned by Commissioner, Afghan Refugees, KP)
- Extending curriculum training and support to teachers (mentioned by Commissioner Afghan Refugees, KP)

Despite these efforts, the contrasting views show that how different is this reality for the refugees. While there may be a sense of rhetorical power from the government, agencies such as UNHCR coupled with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and philanthropists are advocating more aggressively for refugees’ right to education. UNHCR has launched several educational and skill development programmes for refugee learners and actively supports the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) initiative whose purpose is to lessen the impact of long-drawn refugee presence, thereby enhancing social cohesion among refugees and their Pakistani host communities.

3.2. Govt Response and its Implications for Education of Children in Rural-Urban Communities

The initial ed-tech response of the government had a long-term effect on the subsequent response of assisting students in rural areas during school closures as half of the population in rural Pakistan have no access to television (Tabassum et al. 2020). Power outages of around 5-10 hours per day in rural areas is another factor that limits the students to access the TV content (Hasnain 2021). Unable to be fully cognizant of the widespread digital divide in the country, officials have struggled to devise effective strategies to minimize education losses for vulnerable groups such as rural children. With reference to remote areas, Prime Minister launched radio school in December

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3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nd9on4mCfQE
4 https://www.therefugeegirls.com/afghan_b2s
2020 and claimed that this initiative to grant access to ‘some remote areas’ complemented by an e-learning portal with digital content available and a local area network system to deliver content to the poorest regions would be swiftly developed (Federal Ministry of Education and Professional Training 2020).

A “student relief package” with subsidised internet packages and reduced duties on smartphones had also been placed before the Prime Minister for approval (Malik 2020). Conversely, while these efforts may be ardent in nature, they have not necessarily been the best solutions. Founder of Teach for Pakistan, Khadija Shahper Bakhtiar, advances this argument on the basis that “purely digital solutions” might not be the sole answer in the Pakistani context. Some localized initiatives already in place could be conducive to different environments. Instructors have noticed that many, who live in the outskirts of cities, for instance Islamabad do not own mobile phones, thus inviting the local mosques to deliver announcements via loudspeakers so families could collect learning packets from designated spots. In a remote town like Aminabad in Balochistan with few Wi-Fi connections, high school peers have shared video lessons on WhatsApp groups as part of a provincial government and UNICEF-backed programme called ‘My Home My School’ that has reached over 35,000 children. The government actions to push learning online have been met with protest too, creating further disruption. This was due to the main fear that students in remote districts would be unable to participate in classes and cause them not to appear for examinations.

3.3. Govt Response and its Implication for Girls Education

Having previously discussed the cataclysmic effects on girls’ education amplified by the pandemic in Pakistan, there has been a rightful responsibility on the government institutions to centralize this issue in national education goals and policies. Although rudimentary sources like television, radio and e-learning were introduced, a significant portion of students has no access to these as Pakistan is among the countries with widest mobile gender gap (Shanahan 2021). Women are 49% less likely than men in Pakistan to use mobile internet and almost 40% more likely than men not to have access to a mobile phone (ibid). As 40% of girls reported spending more time on household chores (Girls spend more time 2016), so during lockdown this burden on women increased that left them with less chance to avail the aforementioned initiatives to continue their education.

Deteriorating economic conditions due to COVID-19 is a palpable factor that continues to impact education prospects of vulnerable girls as it has the potential to prevent more girls from completing their education. In the households, where girls are not allowed to access EdTech platforms, the government needs to adopt a “multi-stakeholder response” that would equalize access during unforeseen school closures. In KP, the education department noticeably made efforts to enroll out-of-school children that included the provision of thousands of scholarships and monthly stipends for girls, dissemination of free textbooks and establishing facilities that were absent in schools (Human Rights Watch 2018). The induction of the ‘second shift schools’ programme in government schools helped deliver education to students who also are earners, often doing jobs during mornings. Shift schools are also launched to encourage as many girls as possible to access learning opportunities. Generally, in the case a child drop-out in the country, teachers may separately step in to encourage her/him to continue studying (Human Rights Watch 2018). However, there seems to be a prevailing complacency by the state to enrol or retain children in school, which continues to be the case amidst COVID-19.

3.4. Efforts to Educate People with Disabilities

Despite policy commitments to mainstream people with disabilities, there is a non-availability of reliable data on how progressive government responses have been to tackle education inequality for this group. To demonstrate its commitment, the government ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2011, but to-date, people with disabilities suffer entrenched discrimination, marginalisation and neglect, making them unable to participate fully in society (British Council 2021). While the concept of inclusive education is not alien to policy-makers, decades-old governmental attitudes towards those with disabilities via negative verbal labels have affected integration of people with disabilities. When they face barriers in education, there is a domino effect
on economic participation, legal recognition, and availability of clinical resources. Approximately, 1.4 million children with disabilities have no access to either inclusive or special schools; there is a desensitized educational approach unable to inculcate acceptance, tolerance and diversity at large-scale. NGOs, during the pandemic, were key actors representing people with disabilities and with much needed government assistance, can help develop infrastructure, resource rooms and teachers’ training programmes (Shah 2015). Earlier this year, the then Federal Minister for Education Shafqat Mahmood’s renewed pledge to support children with disabilities at the Global Education Summit was a positive step in the right direction (Inclusive education of children 2021)

The above-mentioned higher-level challenges require outreach strategies that must geared towards national educational goals and policy making in order to promote real learning opportunities for all vulnerable groups. To respond to these challenges, other developing countries have devised strategies to quell the impact of COVID-19 on education outcomes for vulnerable learners. Evidently, the education sector is underfinanced in Pakistan and that should be deliberated upon to maintain and protect the teaching force. For instance, resource allocation to release teachers’ salaries and positioning them for a rapid school reopening once clearance is given could be beneficial for the continuity of learning. Success stories from other parts of the developing world can also be insightful and inspirational sources of hope. A case in point is when the Kenyan government implemented lockdown measures, the economic impact on the poor communities was glaring. Creating an opportunity within crisis, the government launched the National Hygiene Programme known as “Kazi Mtaani” translated to “jobs in our hood” efforts to generate employment for the most vulnerable groups, particularly the youth, to take part in jobs that better their environments. These programmes included bush clearance, fumigation, disinfection, street cleaning, garbage collection, and drainage clearance. (World Bank 2020) Focusing on emerging sustainable solutions in informal settlements in Pakistan could improve livelihoods, help feed families and keep children from low-income backgrounds in school. Furthermore, a focus on developing ICT infrastructure for primary and secondary schools to enable the expansion of computer science education is the need of the hour. For instance, the Chilean government’s distribution of computers, tablets and other digital devices has supposedly rescued many from sitting idle. For rural students, in the south of Chile, The Dream House School, in literal terms brought the classroom to students, organizing vans to transport them to children who otherwise may not have had access to education during lockdown. In Pakistan, the way forward to promote access to inclusive education requires a multi-sectorial approach involving different policy areas, particularly social and health. A collaborative process between all sectors to assess the country’s resources may be beneficial for successful policy outcomes.

4. Policy Recommendations

• Keeping in view the sensitivity of the issue, it is essential to address data gaps particularly to measure the number of dropouts (disaggregated by gender, area (rural/urban), refugees, etc.) Availability of required data will help devise evidence-based inclusive policies and reforms by the federal and provincial education departments. Academy of Educational Planning and Management (AEPAM) with the support of National Educational Management Information System (NEMIS) and provincial EMIS need to ensure data provision on regular basis. Joint efforts by provincial EMIS, KP Education Monitoring Authority, Elementary & Secondary Education (E&SE) Department, KP and development partners, including UNHCR, would help gather much needed data, including data of Afghan refugee students that will be helpful to take measures necessary to improve the situation.

• To make ed-tech initiatives successful, community level provision of access to technology is required, e.g. community radio programmes particularly for marginalized community and people living in remote areas. Existing ed-tech response (TV channel, radio) based on current response can be used as potential sources to address learning losses and adapt as alternate learning programmes. Establishment of separate units at the federal ministry and provincial education departments making dedicated efforts can address all the issues and ensure access of ed-tech tools.

• Financial allocations in terms of scholarships/stipends should be extended to deserving students through social protection and welfare schemes.

• Parent-Teachers Councils and School Management Committees can play a positive role in maintaining
enrolments in schools and to overcome the community level barriers and related challenges.

- A strengthened collaboration between government and development partners is required in order to remove connectivity barriers by investing in digital infrastructure for marginalized groups. Economical access to technology may be provided to the poor households.

- Education policy should incorporate measures to meet the needs of children from vulnerable groups to ensure their access to quality education.

- Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Trainings in coordination with the provincial departments should design and implement education policy with regard to participation of most marginalized and vulnerable groups in education. The situation also demands a national education emergency policy particularly with regard to maintaining minimum standards of education during conflicts, emergencies, disruptions, and crisis situations. This should couple with improved coordination between federal and provincial governments and departments concerned.
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