

Lives and livelihoods during lockdown: The critical imperatives for India's economy and need to New Education Policy

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Introduction

There are enough debates ongoing in the country - whether India should focus on lives or livelihood and to my mind, this is not an either or scenario, it is an AND scenario, We need to do both and within the constraints of our economics and healthcare challenges.

The Indian government is in the process of applying its mind on whether it should extend or lift lockdown that ends on June 30, 2020. The choice for Prime Minister Narendra Modi now, as when he decided to impose the lockdown on March 24, is the same — between saving lives and ensuring livelihoods. He rightly privileged the former over the latter then. But as India nears the end of the lockdown period, the serious damage to the economy and livelihoods is beginning to make itself apparent. There is tremendous pressure from industry bodies to opt for a nuanced policy that will help economic activity to restart as they fear a collapse if activity is stopped for another fortnight. Lives could be lost to hunger and livelihoods sacrificed in the lockdown. One way to sidestep this existential dilemma is by bringing on a second round of an economic relief package that goes well beyond the first both in terms of the financial commitment and the spread. Out-of-the-box ideas for delivering support and also for raising the required funds might be required. For starters, it is clear that the government should consign fiscal conservatism to the cupboard for now and go all out to spend and support the economy. Economists are unanimous that there is little option now but to print money and spend. That is exactly what the developed countries are doing.

The 20 lakh crore package announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman was a good start but barely accounted for 1% of GDP. India should spend at least 5% of GDP for now — about 10-lakh crore. The cash transfers to the poor should be hiked to at least 3,000 a month for the next three months.

This should be in addition to free rations and cooking gas, as was announced earlier. In the harvest season, farmers need logistical support for moving their produce to

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markets. Lenders, including NBFCs, should be granted freedom to reschedule their loan accounts so that borrowers are not under pressure to repay for fear of turning delinquent. A credit guarantee fund that will support non-delinquent borrowers for the next six months will be a good option. Such a fund can be financed through a domestic bond offering. The bankruptcy code should be suspended for the next six months, at least for MSMEs. And why not a GST holiday for the next three months? The loss of revenue will be 3-lakh crore at worst, but in reality will be much lower than that because economic activity is at a standstill now. Such a move will ease cash flows for business and also obviate the need for statutory compliances at a time when the focus will have to be on getting businesses back on track. The crisis now is without precedent and the solutions cannot be conservative. Generous support from the government, and quickly delivered, is the need of the hour.

Lockdown: Lives vs Livelihoods in India

Is there a trade-off between saving lives and saving livelihoods? Individuals make decisions about this more often than they might notice. There are too many hazardous occupations to list: mining, security services, bomb disposal, firefighting, sanitation work, waste disposal, high rise construction jobs, and so many more. But also there are multiple health hazards in occupations otherwise deemed not to be hazardous – street workers' exposure to traffic fumes, agricultural workers' exposure to chemicals etc.

These are hard choices for the most part. We try to reduce hazard (health and safety regulations for example) but also, ultimately, leave it as a matter of individual choice. A person, supposedly, decides for herself or himself if a risk is worth taking. There are many flaws in this construction of choice, but also enough in it for most of us to sleep easy, while people put themselves at risk doing jobs that need to be done for our safety or comfort.

What happens when some new source of risk emerges? Such as COVID-19? Our collective choice will determine whether this becomes one additional source of ill-health and death that individuals will have to face, or not. Do we accept it, as we accepted rising levels of air pollution, or traffic accidents – as a fact of life? Or do we say, as we did with respect to terrorism, that this new source of threat is not acceptable, that we will make all efforts to stop it becoming a norm? As a society we have the capacity for both fatalism and activism in good measure. Which do we choose to deploy now?

There are around 1.5 million deaths in Pakistan every year. Not all of them are what are defined as 'premature' deaths. COVID19 is a highly contagious disease. It has, to date, affected over 14,000 people in Pakistan, of whom 292 have died. The rate of fatality has risen from 1.4% to over 2% in just the last two weeks. Even if just a tenth of our

population gets infected, at the current rate of fatality we can expect around half a million deaths. An infection rate of a third would lead to a doubling of the total number of deaths compared to a normal year. If actual fatality rates are much lower, as some have suggested, the number of deaths might be as 'low' as 40,000. For context – road accidents claim around 40,000 lives while air pollution causes 135,000 deaths in a year. The total death toll in the 'war on terror' was estimated to be around 30,000.

Thus for communities and countries, the analysis of a trade-off between saving lives and saving livelihoods is even more complex than it is for individuals. For individuals, we can and do take shelter behind the manufactured assumption of people being free to make their own choices. But for a community or a country, the choice involves saving Person A's life over Person B's livelihood or vice versa. Because there is no simple technical way of resolving this problem, it makes sense to pay attention to collective choices already made.

Why did we choose to draw a line under terrorism even though it was a smaller source of death than air pollution or road accidents? Was it because it arrived suddenly rather than slowly and incrementally? Was it because it threatened, if not stopped, to escalate exponentially? Was it because there was a global consensus that supported our effort? Was it because it threatened to overturn our existing order, and make us a global pariah? We made our collective choices on the basis of who we thought we were, on the basis, yes, of political considerations, but anchored in values. And once we had decided to combat terrorism, how did we frame the issue of its economic impact? Did we debate the 'economic cost' of eradicating terrorism, or did we belt up and create a narrative about the cost that terrorism was imposing on our economy?

Understanding the epidemiology of COVID-19 is science in the making. That in itself would be reason enough to follow validated global practices to slow the disease down, so that our mental and organisational capacities gain time to catch up. We know more now than we did two weeks ago, and will undoubtedly have learned more in the coming two weeks. The same goes for any analysis of the economic impact of the disease as well as measures for its containment. What happens to our economy depends not only on the morbidity and mortality faced by our people, but also on the measures that we as well as our trading, aiding and 'remittance' partners take. In uncertainty of this magnitude – with possible estimates of deaths ranging from 40,000 to over a million – it is not surprising that there are diverse perspectives on the trade-off between saving lives and saving livelihoods.

The question we have to ask ourselves is the following: how low would the probability of a million additional deaths have to be for us NOT to put almost everything we had into containing that number? This cannot be answered only through analytics. It is about who we believe we are, as individuals and as a collectivity. How we respond will then shape what we become.

Need to Reconsider Draft New Education Policy

The ‘one nation, one channel, one digital framework’ the government proposes must ensure equal access to education for all children, as they return to school in the new, post-lockdown normal.

Lockdowns to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic have posed many challenges for school education globally, and India is no exception.

The COVID-19 pandemic, due to its unprecedented scale and unique response strategies, has had a critical impact on children’s education, particularly of those from marginalised sections. Besides the disruption in the school year, there is a risk that prolonged out-of-school learning may lead to alienation of children from school systems and exacerbation of existing inequalities. We could see disruptions in continuity of schooling for girls and children of those who migrated back from urban to rural areas after losing livelihoods, post the abrupt imposition of the lockdown.

The extent of impact of the lockdown on schools, community and children is proportionally very high. India has 1.4 million schools, 2.01 million children enrolled in government schools from Standard 1-8 and an additional 3.8 million children enrolled in Standard 9-10, according to the Udise report on school education in India, 2016-2017. Approximately 29% of India’s population are children, and 19.29 % is in the age group of 6-14 years. This group is legally entitled to education under the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009.

India’s multilayered society has always needed a strong public education system incorporating a holistic vision to achieve universalisation of education while also establishing a discrimination-free education system. However, this didn’t receive adequate attention from policy-makers. Now, the pandemic has magnified inequalities like never before.

Previous health emergencies also demonstrate that the impact on education is likely to be most devastating in countries where there are already low learning outcomes, high drop-out rates and low resilience to shocks. Despite increase in public awareness and aspiration to get children educated, as well as increased enrolment of children in schools

post RTE Act 2009, India's learning crisis remains grave. The Delhi-based ASER Centre's Annual Status of Education reports and many other sources have highlighted this time and again. The National Sample Survey of Estimation of Out-of-School Children report submitted to the ministry of human resource development in 2014 revealed that 6 million children were still out of school.

A look at previous emergencies in the country reveal direct and indirect impacts of natural disasters on school education. Direct impacts include destruction of school buildings and damage to roads connecting to schools, resulting in uncertainty of reopening and irregular attendance. Indirect impacts include long-term closure of a school due to temporary conversion of school building to a rehabilitation centre, silent exclusion of children belonging to families in distress through displacement or migration, resulting in child labour, child marriage and child trafficking, a 2017 study by Azim Premji Univeristy found. But resilience is still not a development priority in India as 76% of the 100 smart cities, including Delhi, lie in zones that are at medium to high risk of floods, earthquakes and winds or all three, according to an essay in *Disaster Risk Governance in India and Cross Cutting Issues*, edited by Indrajit Pal and Rajib Shaw, 2018.

Retrofitting schools and other institutions like hospitals comes with a cost post-disaster, according to the same book. It is astonishing that dialogue between different stakeholders on building a Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) plan is still not a development priority in India, finds the book. Even though COVID-19 is different from previous emergencies on many counts, it is disturbing to see no preparation despite its outbreak in China in the two months before it fully hit India. The lack of resilience and a DRR approach in the country will lead to catastrophic outcomes, some of which are already becoming visible.

The National Commission for Protection of Children Rights (NCPCR), which is the primary monitoring agency of the RTE Act 2009, has seen a huge swell in the number of complaints it has redressed before the lockdown. In the previous year, the NCPCR addressed around 5,000 complaints; post-outbreak (beginning March 2020), this has increased about 8-fold.

School teachers have also been impacted immensely. India's school education system includes 10,93,166 contractual teachers at the elementary level. Delhi alone has approximately 29,000 such contractual teachers. These teachers, in many states like Bihar and Delhi, were not receiving their salary for several months even before the pandemic broke out.

Lack of infrastructure in schools is another major challenge in these COVID times, which will impact continuing school education. The RTE Act brought a normative framework to ensure quality and equity in elementary education. However, even after 11 years, less than 12% schools are RTE-compliant. Lack of safe drinking water, toilets, hand-washing facility, electricity and cramped classrooms means schools don't have the prerequisites to reopen. Further, due to closure of many government schools in several states, as part of a consolidation policy, numerous government primary schools do not fall within the RTE Act requirement that they lie within 1 km from the habitation of all students, which also forms one of the basic principles for reopening schools.

Lack of schools, infrastructure and teaching and non-teaching staff including sanitation workers will impact children's education immensely, during and post-COVID. Further, participation of community, school management committees and local institutions needs to be increased so that local needs and voices are well-represented. Physical distancing, sanitisation and other guidelines for prevention of infection, should be strictly followed for their safety and of others.

Schools are more than learning centres for poor children. They provide social protection, nutrition, health and emotional support to the most disadvantaged, and this applies in all countries, from low- to high-income. About 9.12 crore Indian children are not receiving their mid-day meal during school closure. These meals served as an important safety measure, as economists estimate that 75% of poor families' income is spent on food. Further, lawyers have written to the Chief Justice of India to take *suo moto* notice of rise in cases of child abuse during the lockdown, which highlights that school also acts as a safe space for many children even today.

The big changes to school education in the COVID-19 scenario that the government has announced – digital and online education, attendance of 30-40% children after reopening of schools, subsidy to private schools, to name a few – is another concern which will have a huge impact on children coming from vulnerable sections. National Sample Survey Office 2014-2015 data clearly shows economic factors as key to children dropping out of school.

The pandemic and lockdown has impacted 14 lakh migrant workers as well as others working in the unorganised sector (90% of India's population is engaged in unorganised work). It has impacted the poor adversely across the globe. In such a situation, blatant emphasis on technology-driven education will exclude many children in this country from continuing school education. Besides infrastructural challenges, India is a

diverse and multilingual country. Various dialects, various contexts and diverse lived experiences are what a classroom in India brings together. The one nation, one channel or one digital framework needs to be reconceptualised to ensure equity and quality in education.

The return of children to schools in the above circumstances will bring a new normal, set by the outbreak of the pandemic. Social policy and response during the pandemic will mark the lives of children. On one hand, the school 'space' was used for the benefit of the whole community/'public', blurring the gaps between the community and school, and on the other hand community participation was reduced by social/physical distancing and limited movement from the close precincts of homes. On one hand, the country came together on several occasions to show solidarity and, on the other, fellow villagers were attacked in their own village after painstakingly reaching home, often on foot.

In this 'new normal', changed behaviour of people and changed centralised norms and guidelines could lead to a situation where forms of governance and participation may change. Virtualisation of teaching may impact the social relation between peers, teachers and school and community on the whole. The social class gap between the teachers and students may widen after the school reopens post-lockdown. What would be the everyday experience of children and their response to these changed realities?

The latest Draft New Education Policy (DNEP) 2019, being finalised since long, certainly requires revision in this context. If the 'new normal' becomes the norm, the policy will need to situate equity, inclusion and diversity in the new frame of things. A one nation, one channel or one digital framework will not be able to translate the goal set by the DNEP into action. Further, this will also create barriers to India achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly SDG4 on quality education, which now ever more than before needs to be looked at along with SDG1 (no poverty) 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being), 5 (gender equality), 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and 17 (partnership for the goals).
