



Nepal Case Study

Situation Analysis on the Effects
of and Responses to COVID-19
on the Education Sector in Asia



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October 2021

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Foreword

The pandemic caused a major children's rights crisis: all service sectors being profoundly impacted, with the most disadvantaged being disproportionately affected.

COVID-19 – possibly the largest pandemic the world has ever seen- led to an economic crisis probably more radical and global than ever before; as well as disruption of learning on an unprecedented scale. The pandemic caused a major children's rights crisis: all service sectors being profoundly impacted, with the most disadvantaged being disproportionately affected.

In response, with support from the Global Partnership for Education, UNICEF and UNESCO joined forces with Mott MacDonald, Cambridge Education to carry out a situation analysis, primarily to generate analyses to inform strategic responses to the crisis going forward. While the extension and duration of the pandemic required to invest more time to produce the final analyses and reports, fortunately information had already been discussed through webinars and national conversations with Ministries of Education and other partners across large parts of the Asia Pacific region.

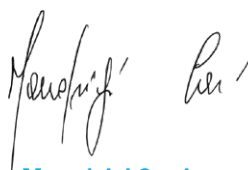
Furthermore, the reports continue to be of utmost relevance given subsequent waves of COVID-19 sweeping across the world in 2021 and very likely in 2022 as well. The task of learning from the crisis and how to mitigate its effects in education is on-going. More than one academic year has now been lost for many children. To ensure continuity of learning whilst schools are closed, the delivery of education is radically changing today through distance education: digital, blended or hybrid learning have become part of the new learning reality which all Governments, teachers and learners will have to adjust to.

While major efforts are needed to mitigate the learning loss of those children who return to school in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase, we must also remember that many children were not learning before the crisis and several million were not even in schools. The reports therefore also explore opportunities to build back better and to re-imagine education; to shift from fact-based didactic methodologies to competency-based approaches, which are more flexible, better respond to the holistic needs and aspirations of all children, and provide opportunities for life-long learning as per the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 agenda.

While the suite of reports provided within the Regional Situation Analysis are particularly relevant to the Asia Pacific region, contexts of course vary considerably across our huge region. At the same time, the reports may also provide insights that are relevant to other regions around the world. Hopefully the findings, including the country case studies, and regional budget needs analysis will help governments resume and accelerate progress towards SDG 4. The way education is conceptualized and delivered is changing fast, and the transformation journey will be steep and full of challenges. Governments, donors, all partners and the private sector will need to work together, not only to get the strategies and levels of investment right, but to build more resilient, effective and inclusive systems, able to deliver on the promise of education as a fundamental human right for all children, whether schools are open or closed.



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List of acronyms

AIN	Association of International NGOs in Nepal
ASIP	Annual Strategic Implementation Plan
AWPB	Annual Work Plans and Budgets
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
CEHRD	Centre for Education and Human Resource Development
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CSO	Civil society organizations
EDCU	Education Development Coordination Units
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ERO	Education Review Office
FT	UNICEF Child and Family Tracker
FY	Financial/fiscal year
GDP	Gross domestic product
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ICT	Information and communications technology
INEE	Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies
INGO	International non-governmental organization
JRM	Joint Review Meeting
LEDPG	Local Education Development Partners Group
MICS	Multiple indicator cluster survey
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoHP	Ministry of Health and Population
NCE	National Campaign for Education
NDLP	Nepal Data Literacy Programme
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NPC	National Planning Commission
NPR	Nepalese rupee
NTA	National Teachers' Association
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SMC	School management committee
SSDP	School Sector Development Plan
STC	Save the Children
SuTRA	Sub-national Treasury Regulatory Application
TA	Technical assistance
ToR	Terms of reference
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the whole world with the twin shocks of a health emergency and an economic recession. There will be long-term costs on human capital accumulation, development prospects and welfare. And although all parts of the world are affected, disproportional burdens are faced by the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) have come together to conduct a rapid assessment of the effects of COVID-19 on education across the Asian continent and of the responses of individual countries to this pandemic. Cambridge Education has been commissioned to conduct this situation analysis. The objectives are:

- To assess and estimate the various impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic on the education sector and stakeholders (children, adolescents, teachers, parents, education officials etc.) in Asia (East, Southeast and South Asia sub-regions);
- To examine policy and financial implications on progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (Education) by 2030;
- To identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors which can be shared with other countries.

The Situation Analysis has picked out examples of effective country approaches which could be replicated or adapted for use in other countries. These individual case studies – in this case for Nepal – provide a deeper analysis of how education systems have been refocussed quickly in challenging circumstances to ensure children can safely continue to learn.

Background

Nepal has made significant improvements in human and social development and inclusiveness over the past decades: fewer people now live in extreme poverty, newborn mortality has fallen and more households have access to toilets. Education also saw progress, with improvements in net enrolment rates in basic and secondary education, gender parity in enrolment, basic education survival and completion rates and increasing literacy among 15–24-year-olds.

The government acknowledges that there are still many challenges to achieving the SDG targets, exacerbated by:

"multidimensional poverty, structural constraints, complex geophysical features and detrimental impacts of climate change."¹

Following the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution and the 2017/18 local, provincial and federal elections, Nepal initiated a transition from a unitary federal system to a decentralized system. The associated constitutional change consists of a three-tiered elected system of government:

- Federal: Ministries, national commissions, line agencies
- Provincial: Seven provincial governments, sector ministries, and sector-based institutions and educational institutes
- Local: 753 local governments (urban and rural municipalities).

Under the earlier 'unitary' system, the districts (a non-elected layer of government) oversaw local development and management, including education, disaster response and risk reduction, under the direction of the Ministry and the Department of Education. In the new system, municipalities have a high degree of autonomy to plan and implement government activities. Whilst this change provides an opportunity for localized, responsive work, it was also a significant change for local governments – roles needed to be clarified; management mechanisms set up; and people put in place and prepared to manage the work. COVID-19 struck in the relatively early days of this change, testing the capacity of local governments to respond to the crisis.

Nepal has made significant achievements in raising access to and inclusion in education, particularly for girls and marginalized groups. In 2019, net enrolment rates stood at 96 per cent in primary, 87 per cent in pre-primary and 61 per cent in secondary schools.² Despite this progress, quality and learning achievement are falling behind the SDG targets: the 2017 round of National Assessment of Student Achievements (NASA) for grade 8 revealed that, despite progress in access and retention indicators, average learning scores in two core subjects (maths and science) had actually decreased over the previous five years.³

Effects of COVID-19

The first case of the virus was identified in Nepal in January 2020. Following the identification of the second case in March, the country entered a strict lockdown with borders and all but essential government services closed. In May 2020, the national budget for the health sector was increased by approximately NPR 30 billion for the 2020/2021 fiscal year (FY 20/21),⁴ with NPR 6 billion (some \$60 million) specifically targeted at combating the virus.⁵

Federal government provided the following guidelines and protocols to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, giving local governments responsibility for supporting, planning and implementing their local response.

- COVID-19 Education Cluster Contingency Plan 2020 (approved 7 May 2020)
- Alternative Learning Facilitation Guidelines (approved 31 May 2020)⁶
- Emergency Action Plan for School Education (approved 22 September 2020)
- School Reopening Framework (approved 5 November 2020)
- Closed User Group Service Implementation guidelines (in process of being approved).

Up to one third of Nepal's population are at risk of remaining or being pushed back into poverty⁷ due to school closures during COVID-19. The current scenario of the contingency plan projects that 2.2 million additional children will not be able to complete their education unless they receive additional support.⁸

In a country where learning outcomes levels are already low, particularly amongst the most disadvantaged members of society, this estimation causes particular



concern. One of the main aims of the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) is to increase learning outcomes, but it seems likely that, despite efforts to support continuity of learning during school closures, there will still be children who fall even further behind because of the lack of regular, continuous face-to-face contact and protected space for learning that school provides. Children without access to technology are potentially at a greater disadvantage for learning remotely.

The worsened economic hardship as a result of COVID-19 is likely to be disproportionately severe for children from marginalized groups related to challenges with participating successfully in distance learning (radio, TV and internet), and the difficult conditions to learn using self-learning materials.

Ensuring that all schools are able to safeguard the health of students and teachers will require large investment: in 2020 only 55 per cent of the more than 35,000 schools had girls' toilets with running water, for instance. Although 81 per cent of the population has access to handwashing facilities with soap, there are large geographical disparities within this, with the figure being just 55 per cent in Karnali Province for example.⁹

With schools closed and the country under lockdown, it is predicted that there will be many negative effects on children's health and well-being in the short and longer term because of the reduction in basic services and a likely increase in anxiety. Girls and the youngest children have been disproportionately affected, as access to basic healthcare and mechanisms for child protection are vastly reduced at the same time as family pressures increased.

The focus of the health sector shifted to combating COVID-19 during this period. The health sector budget for 2020/21 is significantly higher than the previous year but the necessary focus on COVID-19 has been to the detriment of vaccination programmes and other campaigns, and the treatment of other diseases.¹⁰ This has left many children without the basic healthcare needed to support healthy growth. There are also concerns about children's nutrition, as school closure means that children do not receive daily school meals. The UNICEF child and family tracker indicated that one in five households are struggling to meet key dietary requirements,¹¹ which could have a detrimental health on children's long-term development.

Safeguarding incidents have also increased. Reported cases of domestic violence more than doubled in the first three months of the lockdown and cases of rape or attempted rape also increase substantially in this period.¹²

In some areas, child marriage was said to have increased during the lockdown, which might affect student dropout rates.¹³ Since mid-March 2020, 1,350 persons (including 319 children and 876 women) are reported to have died by suicide. Suicide among adolescent girls increased by almost 40 per cent during the four months of lockdown compared to the same period the previous year, with some increase among boys, according to Nepal Police reports compiled for UNICEF.

COVID-related disruptions in livelihoods and the contraction in household consumption are expected to have affected poor and vulnerable households, including those engaged in informal activities, disproportionately. The pandemic has caused migration patterns to change. Poor daily wage labourers depend on regular work to be able to afford urban living costs. Without work, their savings disappear quickly, and they have no choice but to leave, mostly to their home village. This has an impact on school enrolment: when workers leave with their families, their children will need to be accommodated in village schools once they have returned. At the same time the return of migrant workers, mostly from India and the Gulf States, has put a further strain on village and household resources.

Nepal is highly dependent on remittances from migrant labour abroad, which are worth over a quarter of its gross domestic product (GDP).¹⁴ This dependency on money earned outside the country means livelihoods are particularly vulnerable to the border closures associated with COVID-19. After a sharp dip, overseas remittances to Nepal started rising again between July and September, suggesting some economic recovery.¹⁵ However, there will be much uncertainty in the future as slower economic growth globally will affect employment opportunities in the destination countries, with remittances to Nepal predicted to decline by 12 per cent in 2020.¹⁶

In August 2020, the UNICEF child and family tracker found that:

- Over 90 per cent of surveyed families reported the need for additional cash to support their children.
- Over 90 per cent of households in the lowest income groups, including those who had no earnings, emphasized this need.
- Some 60 per cent of highest-income households also reported needing additional cash for their children, possibly because they had lost employment and had no earnings during lockdown.¹⁷



Challenges

The following challenges emerged in responding to the crisis:

- Minimizing learning loss. With schools likely to be closed for a long period of time all children needed to have opportunities and materials to help them study. Technology was a solution for some children, but as access to internet and TV is low the government had to find a range of alternative solutions with the potential to reach all children, including the most disadvantaged.
- Keeping teachers motivated and involved. Most of them were not prepared for the switch in learning modalities. Many were dealing with increased family pressures and felt anxiety about face-to-face contact.
- Creating robust coordination mechanisms, taking prompt action and having sufficient implementation capacity were significant challenges because the responsibility for providing alternative methods of learning and reopening schools were shared between the federal, provincial and local governments.

Responses

The government was aware of the need to provide a range of alternative approaches to reach as many children as possible. A multi-pronged approach was therefore adopted, with different modalities being developed for different groups of children, depending on their access to electricity and connectivity.¹⁸

Several local governments launched radio and TV programmes and distributed self-learning packs for those who did not have access to the internet. With their local awareness and knowledge, municipalities could adapt approaches according to need – one official¹⁹ said that when they realized that not enough radios were available to households, they began distributing self-learning packs to students. However, there were still specific challenges in reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized, and more support was needed to implement inclusive activities.

The various approaches to supporting continuity of learning have gone a long way towards helping students to study. But there is little data on the extent of the many successes, or on how much children have learned through these modalities. Much of the information is either small-scale or anecdotal. Systematic monitoring and reporting, along with the development of assessment mechanisms, will be essential for local governments to ensure that guidelines are being followed and can understand the extent to which children in their area have been supported to study.

Collection and analysis of this information will enable lessons to be learned and should make learning continuity resilient to future shocks.

From November 2020, when the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) devolved the decisions to reopen schools to local government, municipalities brought the national standards procedures (based on local risk assessments) into action. These guidelines devolved decision-making powers and management responsibilities to local government, in collaboration with the district COVID-19 response management centre. Responsibilities include deciding reopening dates, whether to have phased or staggered reopening, and ensuring that schools used for quarantining were disinfected. Local governments are implementing the new directive at different speeds. As of January 2021, an estimated 85 per cent of schools have reopened.²⁰ There are some reports that local governments are closing schools again if and where local transmission has increased.²¹ There is concern that variation in local oversight and resources could lead to lack of control of safety standards in underserved municipalities. To address this, disinfection and public health safety protocols have been incorporated into the school reopening framework.

Throughout the response there have been various initiatives to support the health and well-being of children. Mental health and psychosocial support has mainly been provided through civil society organizations (CSOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). The importance of such partnerships was reiterated in the Joint Sector Review of November 2020: the Association of INGOs in Nepal (AIN)'s combined presence (it has 40 members) is supporting education in more than 500 of the 753 municipalities. Collectively, AIN organizations cover nearly half of Nepal's more than 35,000 public schools. And assistance provided through the CSO networks in the Nepal Local Education Group to the pandemic response of the Nepal Education Cluster (covering 362 municipalities) has been a critical support mechanism.

Finance for the education response came from a range of sources and was allocated through government mechanisms:

1. The government applied for \$10.85 million from Global Partnership for Education (GPE). A significant proportion of this (\$4.66 million) was allocated to 100 municipalities, selected according to need and COVID-19 prevalence.
2. Additional support was committed by World Bank (for higher education), GPE, Finland and USAID.²²

3. Some funds (around \$30 million) from SSDP were redirected including:

- » All municipalities received funding for the COVID-19 response, both in the last trimester of the 2019/20 fiscal year, and as part of the 2020/21 fiscal year annual workplan and budget, in August 2020.
- » In addition to this, municipalities could also use their equalization grant²³ budget and revenues.

Federal relief programmes have been launched in response to COVID-19, such as cash/food for workers; loans to businesses; extension on tax payment deadlines; and rebates on utility bills.²⁴ The Ministry of Finance (MoF) committed to expand the Universal Child Grant to 11 new districts, which will benefit an estimated 415,000 children and their families, many living in COVID-19 hotspots where economic activity is curtailed.²⁵

Strengthening the capacity of local government

At a time when the decentralization process was not yet fully operational, and given the existing capacity constraints, the COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges for all levels of government. Each municipality had its own challenges and level of capacity. Priorities were changed immediately and there was an urgent need to respond to the pandemic.

The Foundation for Development Management and Nepal Institute for Policy Research report commented that, despite the limitations of municipalities, they were able to find local solutions and mobilize resources to provide a rapid response to the crisis.²⁶ This is borne out in education by the way in which municipalities used local knowledge and understanding to adapt resources for alternative learning modalities with the aim of reaching as many learners as possible.

There have been genuine efforts and commitment within the education sector at all levels to minimize the loss of learning while keeping children, teachers and parents safe during the pandemic. Although decentralization is not yet complete, local government, with support, has responded to the crisis and managed (to some extent) to continue education within a difficult context. Despite constraints, government and teachers' professional organizations have been proactive in getting teachers trained and it is encouraging that the Education Management Information System (EMIS) confirms that the most-used alternative education modalities are supported by teachers.

The COVID-19 pandemic may well have galvanized inter-governmental coordination and collaboration, with the situation permitting the Nepal Education Cluster to facilitate coordination by establishing provincial clusters. The fact that Nepal is disaster-prone and therefore already has an active, strong national cluster mechanism will undoubtedly have helped.

The sector analysis and consultations undertaken during the development of the new Education Sector Plan (2021–2030) provide a wide range of possible priorities such as institutional,²⁷ labour market compatibility, disability, inclusion and gender,²⁸ macro-economic and public finance,²⁹ and social impact.³⁰ This plan is expected to be fully aligned with federal institutional arrangements and to include measures to strengthen local government, as municipalities are mandated to deliver school education. The COVID-19 pandemic has put local government to the test in terms of acting on this mandate in response to the pandemic, and has also tested the federal and provincial governments in supporting them.

Recommendations

When schools had to close, local government (to some extent guided by the federal government that provided disaster relief funds) introduced a multi-pronged approach to enable children to continue learning. Textbooks were made available despite schools being closed and self-learning packs were distributed with adjusted curriculums for home learning. Teachers have been enabled to visit homes, and in some cases to teach in smaller groups. Other remote teaching modalities using radio and the internet have been developed and rolled out, but access was limited by poor internet connectivity.

This report makes some key recommendations for action:

Tackle absenteeism

While schools are opening up, the traditional means of recording attendance will have to be revised to track children while they transition from alternative education back to school-based learning. Many children will require targeted support to return to and remain in school after the reopening. It will be necessary to review and adapt the procedures and mechanisms for dealing with absenteeism, and capacity should be built at municipality and school level to use these effectively.

Test students on competency and learning loss, and provide tools for teachers to put learning back on track

When children come back to school, it is expected that there will be wider disparities in learning levels than before the pandemic. Competency and learning should be assessed and priority given to foundational learning in literacy and numeracy. Standardized diagnostic tests should be adapted so that the subsequent reduction in these pandemic-related disparities can be monitored.

Reopen schools and ensure a safe and healthy environment for teachers and students

It is important for government to ensure real-time monitoring of the number of schools that have reopened and the compliance with measures undertaken to provide a safe learning and development environment for children. It would be highly disadvantageous for children to be out of school much longer, particularly those from vulnerable communities.

Cross-cutting priorities

For COVID-19 recovery, there are specific needs for data collection, analysis and use to ensure that cross-cutting priorities are realized. The ongoing efforts to strengthen EMIS provide a timely opportunity for this in terms of capturing progress towards COVID-19 recovery.

Strengthen local governance capacity and management

There is also a need to strengthen the mechanisms for using EMIS in local-level response and recovery – having real-time data and feedback mechanisms available to local government will allow dynamic decision-making and adaptability to emerging needs and challenges. More technical support is needed at palika level in the use of evidence for planning and monitoring, much of which requires real-time data. Of particular relevance in Nepal is regular attendance checking, including for distance learning, to prevent students dropping out. Data on learning is vital to know whether distance learning

strategies are effective and whether remediation interventions are successful. Real-time data allows schools' compliance with safety protocols to be monitored. It also facilitates the tracking of school WASH infrastructure and can be used to detect schools that need more support. Finally, regular data is needed to help strengthen the whole system in terms of quality education, skills and learning.

The work started at national level on developing human-development-based formulas to determine equalization grants, and the equity-based allocations of pro-poor and targeted scholarships, plus the additional grants for local Equity Strategy Implementation Plans provides an opportunity to further embed evidence- and need-based planning and budgeting in the design of the new education sector plan.

Conclusion

When the COVID-19 crisis began, the Nepal education sector was in a state of transition following the 2015 constitutional changes. Municipalities with elected councils became responsible for school management while provincial governments now cover teacher training and development and provide technical support and coordination. This transition presents a challenge in coordination between the three levels of government, and the capacity of local government needs to be upgraded to match the requirements of their large mandate. The COVID-19 crisis dealt a severe blow to the fragile progress that had been made on a new delivery system, so there is now a need to fast-track education service delivery that is tailored to an effective COVID-19 response and accelerates progress towards longer-term goals.





Country fact sheet

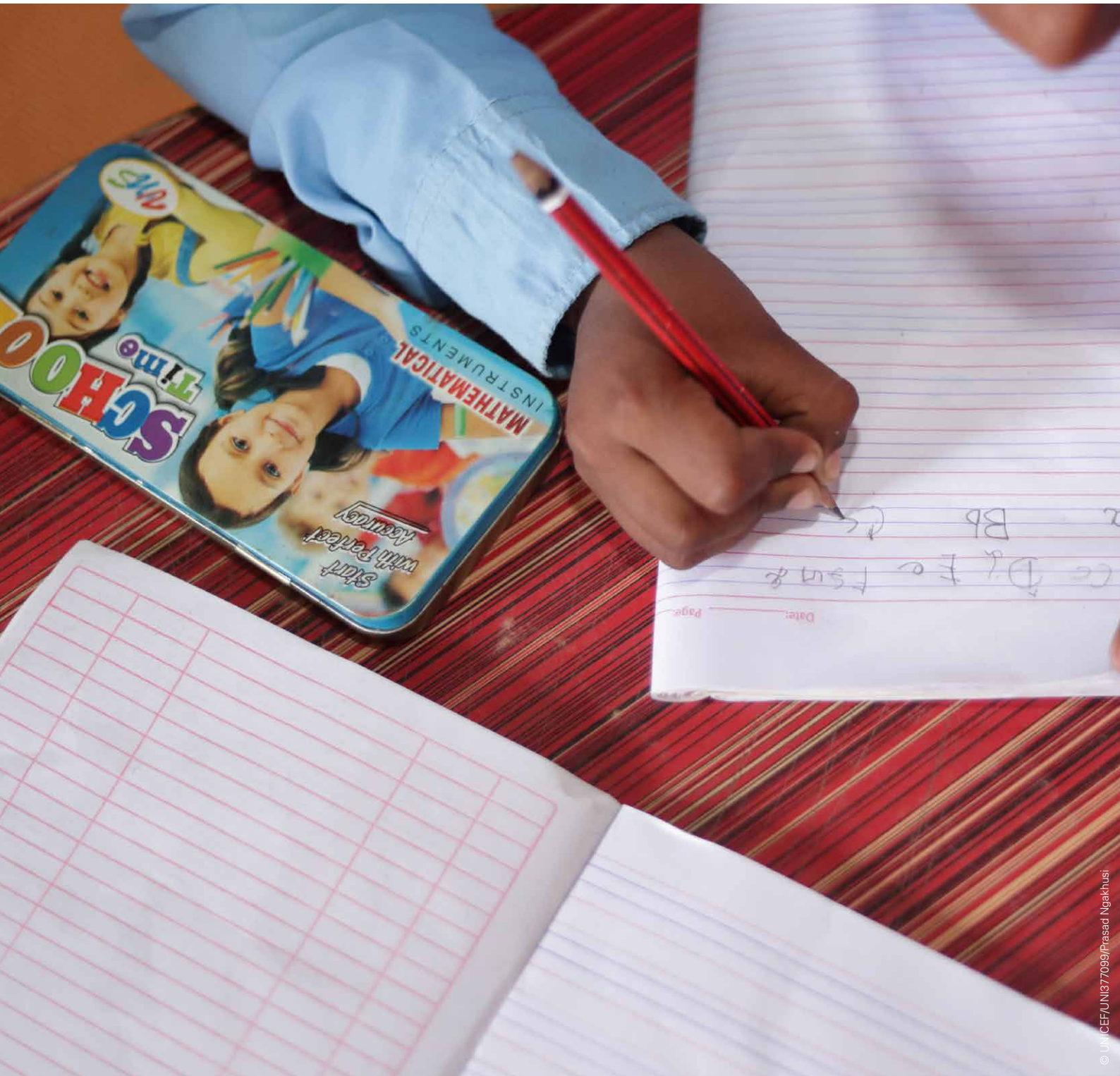
The table below provides a snapshot of the pandemic, education sector response and background information for Nepal.

DIMENSION	INDICATOR/QUESTION	INFORMATION
Epidemiology	Date of first confirmed case	23 January 2020 ³¹
	Date of first confirmed death	16 May 2020 ³²
	COVID-19 cases and deaths over time ³³	256,698 confirmed cases 1,932 deaths (12 January 2021) ³⁴
	Details about the pandemic and government responses	The country was in lockdown from 24 March until 9 September 2020. Government orders with several tiers of restriction were put in place. Decisions on the level of measures is delegated to the Chief District Officers. During the school closure, local government started using some schools as quarantine centres.
School closure	Were schools closed, partially or fully?	Nationally, schools were fully closed. A few students in public schools (6–10 per cent by estimates from the Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) were able to continue learning through the use of the online portal; 85 per cent of schools reopened by Jan 2021, as per the school reopening framework adopted by Cabinet in November 2020.
	Date of school closures	19 March 2020
	Date of school reopening	The municipalities started reopening schools from the end of November 2020. As of January 2021, most municipalities had opened, with those in the Kathmandu valley confirming that their schools would resume from mid-January 2021.
	Have schools reopened, fully or partially?	By January 2021 an estimated 85 per cent of all schools had reopened. Schools in the Kathmandu Valley were set to open in the second half of January 2021 due to COVID-19 transmission rates remaining high.
Key vulnerable groups	Key vulnerable groups affected by the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector	The definition of vulnerable populations is based on that laid out in Agenda 2030 and includes 'women, children, youth, persons with disabilities (of whom more than 80 per cent live in poverty), people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants.' ³⁵ Many children became more vulnerable during school closures as access to essential services were reduced and many families were living on reduced incomes. In all the groups mentioned above, children with disabilities are disproportionately more vulnerable than their peers.
Education system structure	Brief description of the structure of the education system – federal or centralized	The MoEST makes policy. School is compulsory for 10 years from ages 3–12 and is structured as follows: ³⁶ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-primary • Basic education: Grades 1-8, ages 5-12 • Secondary: Grades 9-12, ages 13-16 In 2017, a new constitution devolved the mandate for education management to local government. Provincial government has a coordinating role and is in charge of teacher education. A new Education Act should provide more specificity.

DIMENSION	INDICATOR/QUESTION	INFORMATION	
Pre-COVID-19 progress towards SDG4 indicators³⁷	School population ³⁸	Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Pre-primary Education (PPE)	1,105,561
		Lower basic	3,543,862
		Upper basic	1,775,142
		Secondary	1,040,976
		Higher secondary	661,642
		Tertiary	3,287,931
	Primary gross enrolment %	Female	143
		Male	141
		Total	142
	Primary net enrolment %	Total	96
	Secondary gross enrolment %	Female	83
		Male	74
		Total	80
	Secondary net enrolment %	Female	63
		Male	61
Total		62	
Out-of-school children (2019)	Total	103,384	
Out-of-school adolescents	Female	11,364	
	Male	35,234	
	Total	46,598	
Repetition rates %	Female	8	
	Male	7	
	Total	8	
Survival to the last grade of primary (2016)	Female	73	
	Male	74	
	Total	74	
Transition rates from primary to lower secondary (2016)	Female	81	
	Male	84	
	Total	82	

01

Introduction



Some of the most vulnerable children felt the side-effects of COVID-19 from the moment nationwide lockdowns were put in place to control the spread of the disease.

1.1 Background

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the whole world with the twin shocks of a health emergency and an economic recession. This will lead to long-term costs on human capital accumulation, development prospects and welfare. Responses to the situation have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society.

Some of the most vulnerable children felt the side-effects of COVID-19 from the moment nationwide lockdowns were put in place to control the spread of the disease. Markets, workshops, farms and factories closed, leaving children and families stranded. For many, the fear and uncertainty continue. Some minorities find themselves stigmatized and accused of causing or spreading the pandemic. Deep-rooted inequalities in societies are being exposed.

Asia, with its huge population and many overcrowded cities, is potentially very vulnerable to COVID-19 which spreads through close contact with infected people. The contexts within which people of South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia are having to cope with the virus are very different, with a disparity in living conditions and varying degrees of access to and quality of essential services such as health and education. Across the continent there is vast inequality between the rich and poor and therefore different levels of resilience to the shocks that this disease has brought, putting the poor at long-term risk far beyond

contracting the virus. This region regularly suffers from shocks which lead to localized learning interruptions. For example, during the pandemic, Bangladesh and India were in the path of a cyclone and recent floods have threatened communities, giving them a double shock.

This Situation Analysis has been undertaken as part of a broader analysis initiated by UNICEF and UNESCO to provide a snapshot at the educational responses and effects of COVID-19 across Asia. It considers the direct effects of school closures and reopening, and identifies the initial impact on learners, their families and the education system as a whole. It aims to develop insight based on the responses to the pandemic in Asia, seeking to understand the contextual factors that may have supported (or hindered) learning and paying particular attention to the most disadvantaged groups. For this, the analysis has the following objectives:

- To assess and estimate the various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector and stakeholders in Asia.
- To examine policy and financial implications on progress towards achieving SDG4 (Education) by 2030.
- To identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors which can be shared with other countries.

Following the development of the case studies (including this Nepal situation analysis), the overall study will include an overview of the situation in each of the three Asian sub-regions and finally the region as a whole.

1.2 Methodology

The UNICEF and UNESCO offices in each country supported the case studies by providing relevant information and contacts with relevant officials. This allowed the researchers to collect country-specific documents, grey literature and data to describe the COVID-19 journey across Asia, its impact and the responses of each education system.

In addition to a literature review, each case study carried out interviews with key stakeholders (listed in Annex A). These include government policy makers and implementers at federal and palika (local government) levels, UNICEF and UNESCO teams, Education Cluster members, development partners and members of civil society such as the National Campaign for Education (NCE). Interviews yielded first-hand information about the challenges and how the responses were developed. The conversations provided opportunities to discuss the lessons learned and what remains to be done.

A cross-cutting focus on the most vulnerable members of society, particularly girls and learners with disabilities, has been used throughout the assessment.

1.3 Limitations of the case study

Although some stakeholder interviews conducted, they were limited by the time available and the scope of the study. Some areas, such as early childhood care and education, and education for children with disabilities during the pandemic, would benefit from further analysis.

Furthermore, this case study is mostly focusing on the 2020 Covid-19 waves and school closures. It does not cover the 2021 subsequent closures, and recent reopening of schools in the third quarter of 2021, with revised guidance.

1.4 Structure of the case study

The case study has four chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction and a country fact sheet. Chapter 2 uses the framework in Figures 1 and 2 (below) to discuss the effects of COVID-19 on the education system across four dimensions, where challenges and responses are set out against the three phases of school reopening. Chapter 3 provides an analysis based on the Nepal-specific research question – how capacity at the (recently emerged) local government level has affected/facilitated the response to COVID-19 in the education sector. Chapter 4 gives an overview of the lessons learned and makes specific recommendations for Nepal and other countries on building back better and increasing the resilience of the education system to future shocks.

FIGURE 1 | THREE PHASES OF SCHOOL REOPENING

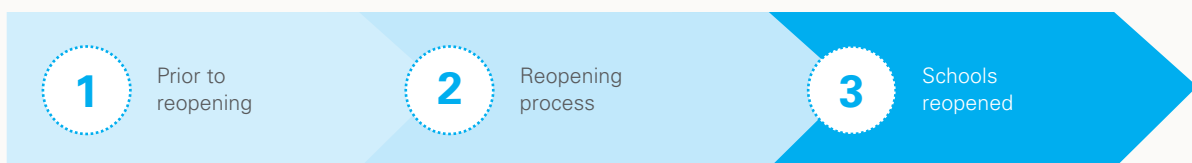
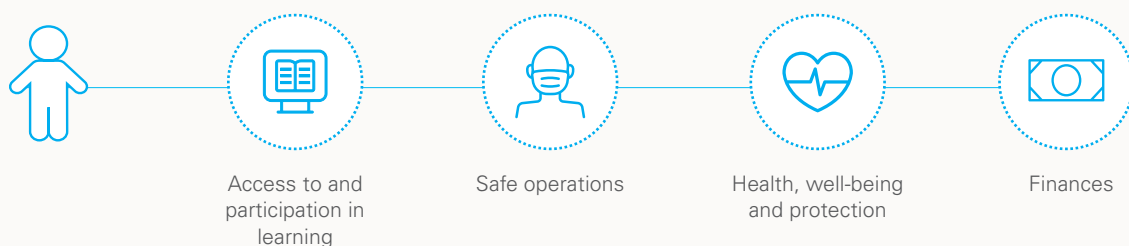


FIGURE 2 | FOUR DIMENSIONS OF ANALYSIS OF EFFECTS





02

Effects of and response to COVID-19 on the education sector in Nepal



Nepal has developed capabilities for emergency response at every level of government, as it is prone to both national and local natural disasters.

2.1 Overview of Nepal

Nepal is a landlocked country divided into seven culturally distinct provinces.³⁹ It borders India to the south and China to the north. The terrain lies in three distinct belts: the lower Terai plains across the southern part of the country, the middle hills across the centre, and the Himalayan mountains across the north. The population comprises 26.5 million people from 125 different castes/ethnicities. There are 123 languages and 10 religions. Half of the total population live in the Terai districts.⁴⁰ In 2020 some 19 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line.⁴¹

The country has made strides in development over the past 20 years with significant achievements in human and social development and inclusiveness during that period. The government acknowledges that there are still many challenges to achieving the SDG targets, exacerbated by:

"Multidimensional poverty, structural constraints, complex geophysical features and detrimental impacts of climate change."⁴²

Nepal has developed capabilities for emergency response at every level of government, as it is prone to both national and local natural disasters. In 2015 the country suffered a huge earthquake which had far-reaching effects. Landslides in the mountains and hills and localized flooding are common. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, was a unique crisis for which most governments, including Nepal, were not prepared.

The first case of the virus was identified in Nepal in January 2020. When a second case was identified in March, the country entered a strict lockdown with borders and all but essential government services closed. In May 2020, the government repurposed a part of the national budget to increase health sector resources for COVID-19 prevention

and response by approximately NPR 30 billion (about \$248 million) for the 2020/21 fiscal year,⁴³ with NPR 6 billion specifically targeted towards combating the virus.⁴⁴

The areas that were initially most vulnerable to COVID-19 and experienced the earliest high levels of infection were in the southern and south western belt, which had an influx of returnee migrants from India. From around June, the number of community infections increased, and COVID-19 cases spread throughout the country. Some of the most remote areas have been relatively spared due to natural isolation. At present, infection rates are highest in the urban areas, particularly the Kathmandu Valley, and could spread again from there more intensely into the rural areas.

As well as a health crisis, this is also a major economic crisis that is affecting the country's most vulnerable populations, especially women, the hardest. According to the UNDP Rapid Assessment Survey in 2020, the majority of employees in the hardest hit employment sectors are women; more women (41 per cent) have lost their jobs than men (28 per cent).

"It is expected that those hardest and most immediately impacted by the crisis and the necessary measures of lock-down will be the most vulnerable... The definition of vulnerable populations is based on that laid out in Agenda 2030 and includes- but is not limited to- women, children, youth, persons with disabilities (of whom more than 80 per cent live in poverty), people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants."⁴⁵

Nepal is aiming to achieve middle-income status by 2030. Since the earthquake in 2015, the country has had three consecutive years where the growth in the economy averaged almost 7 per cent. Pre-COVID-19 it was predicted that growth in 2020 would continue at the same level.⁴⁶

The consequences of the pandemic are unlikely to affect the transition to middle-income status in the long term, but achievement of the SDG targets will be challenging.⁴⁷ In the short term, however, the country's reliance on tourism, external trade (particularly with India and China) and foreign remittances – all adversely affected by the crisis – means it is likely to see a decline in economic growth.

"The cumulative impact of trade, tourism and remittance shocks – as well as the negative economic externalities they trigger in allied sectors, Nepal's projected pre-COVID-19 GDP growth rate of 8.5 percent will plunge to well below 2.5 percent in 2019-2020, and severely constrain a rebound in 2020-2021."⁴⁸

Government structure

In 2017, Nepal began a process of decentralization. The associated constitutional change created a three-tiered elected government system:

1. **Federal:** ministries, national commissions, line agencies
2. **Provincial:** seven provincial governments, sector ministries and sector-based institutions and educational institutes
3. **Local:** 753 local governments (urban and rural municipalities).

Under the earlier 'unitary' system, the districts (a non-elected layer of government) oversaw local development and management, including education, under the direction of the Ministry and the Department of Education. In the new system, municipalities have a high degree of autonomy to plan and implement government activities.

The recent introduction of the Sub-national Treasury Regulatory Application (SuTRA) system, an online accounting system for municipalities, constitutes a significant step forward on direct budgeting and expenditure management, but is still being rolled out. The municipalities regard the districts as a relic from the past unitary system, and frictions are quite common.

The Nepal Education Sector Analysis 2020⁴⁹ recognized the opportunity brought by decentralization to motivate teachers and advance learning, whilst noting the human resource capacity constraints to effectively manage and support teachers. One of the five priority areas for the SSDP initiated in 2016 was to strengthen the governance and management of education. A specific focus on making local governments robust and accountable was added during the updating of the SSDP, based on its 2019 mid-term review. The capacity of local government to

manage the school sector does not yet match its vast mandate and responsibilities. Roles still need to be clarified and hierarchy issues solved. Gaps in the coordination between government levels still need to be filled and disparities between the provinces needs to be overcome (this is discussed in more depth in Chapter 3).

"As the transition of Nepal's governance from unity to a federal structure is underway education delivery in general and risk mitigation in particular are affected. Education is currently a low priority for many provincial and local governments, often where resources are stretched, and capacity is underdeveloped. Key legislation is yet to be voted at the federal level and translated into local policies and ambiguities around roles and responsibilities of the three tiers of governments is yet to be resolved."⁵⁰

This major constitutional reform was only three years into transition when COVID-19 struck, testing the capacity of the decentralized system to respond to the crisis.

Education development

The annual joint sector reviews and the 2019 mid-term review of the SSDP (the latter carried out by a team of eight international and national experts) confirm that Nepal has experienced significant achievements in raising access to and inclusion in education, particularly for girls and marginalized groups. In 2019 net enrolment was 87 per cent in pre-primary, 96 per cent in primary, and 61 per cent in secondary schools.⁵¹ Despite this progress, there is concern that Nepal is falling behind the SDG learning achievement targets.

Quantitative data indicate that there is gender parity in enrolment throughout the school system. Nepal household contributions to education nearly match the government's investment in the public sector,⁵² but many households still prioritize boys' education, as indicated by higher enrolment of boys in private schools. Progress has been made in enrolling the most marginalized at the basic level, and reducing numbers of out-of-school children, but access to early childhood education and secondary education remains limited for the poorest students.⁵³ Furthermore, although the projections by CBS estimate the percentage of school-aged children (aged 3–16) with one or more disabilities is 2 per cent (significantly lower than the global averages for this which are 10–12 per cent), only 0.3 per cent of the schoolchildren of this age group are identified as having one or more disabilities. This confirms that children with disabilities have the lowest enrolment rates of all vulnerable groups.⁵⁴



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The National Achievement Survey of 2017 for grade 8, conducted for Nepali and mathematics, showed that many children were not developing the level of language proficiency and numeracy needed to succeed in secondary and higher education. The Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster survey of 2019 found that reading and numeracy skills are low, with only a quarter of children in grades 1–5 possessing basic reading skills and 39 per cent possessing basic numeracy skills.⁵⁵

A 2020 review of progress towards SDG 4 by the National Planning Commission (NPC) found that:

"Indicators on education show good progress but the impact is uneven across different provinces and groups."⁵⁶

In 2017, UNICEF highlighted that only:

"12 per cent of children from the lowest wealth quintile are developmentally on track in literacy and numeracy compared to 65 per cent from the highest wealth quintile."⁵⁷

Children from the most marginalized groups are more likely to come from families within the lowest wealth quintile. Existing societal attitudes towards those groups still hinder enrolment, cause dropout and impede learning.⁵⁸ These findings all highlight that pre-COVID-19 there was still significant work, particularly in terms of the most marginalized, needed to achieve the SDG 4 targets.

The 2016 SSDP set out clear priorities for education. The plan was underpinned by three areas for improvement: inclusion, access and quality. Reduction of disparities in access, participation and learning, along with improving pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and materials, institutional capacity strengthening, and assuring agreed minimum standards for schools were particular foci.

The pandemic interrupted progress four years into the SSDP, so supplementary plans had to be developed to provide a short- and medium-term response to the crisis, whilst keeping the SSDP priorities. The MoEST reacted quickly and shut all education institutions for at least a month until April 2020, postponing exams for grades 10,11 and 12. At the time it was expected that this closure would be extended and at the time of writing schools had been closed for 10 months.

The initial COVID-19 Education Cluster Contingency Plan 2020 presented three scenarios:

1. Schools open before the new fiscal year (mid-July).
2. Schools reopen before Dashain (September).
3. Schools remain closed for the entire academic year.⁵⁹

The objective of the plan was to prevent the spread of the virus through children into the local community by providing safe learning environments. To do this, three areas of support were identified:

1. Ensuring adequate capacity for management and coordination during the response period.
2. Strengthening prevention and resilience within the school system and among students, teachers, parents and caregivers.
3. Support continuity of education/learning for all children in all areas including children with disabilities and from marginalized backgrounds.⁶⁰

The national government provided the following guidelines and protocols, the intention being that local government would take responsibility for supporting, planning and implementing local responses:

- Contingency Action Plan (approved 28 July 2020)
- Alternative Learning Facilitation Guidelines (approved 16 June 2020)
- Emergency Action Plan for School Education (approved 22 September 2020)
- School Health Safety and Sanitation Guidelines (approved 27 August 2020)
- School Reopening Framework (approved 19 November 2020)
- Closed User Group (CUG) Service Implementation guidelines (in process of being approved).

2.2 Effects of COVID-19 across four dimensions

Access to and participation in learning

The World Bank estimates that five months of school closure can result in a learning loss equivalent to 0.6 years of schooling. This would bring down the effective years of basic schooling from 7.9 to 7.3 years.⁶¹ Most schools in Nepal were closed for a period of at least seven months during the pandemic and some are yet to reopen.

Lessons learned from the 2015 earthquake confirm that it is hard to assess the implications of school closures on children's learning levels, or whether it will increase dropout and repetition, as this is largely dependent on the

pre-existing vulnerability amongst students at the start of the school closures.⁶² However, the projections included in the third scenario of the education sector COVID-19 Contingency Plan (NEC, 2020) (which highlight that children at risk are less likely to complete their education due to the loss of learning experienced over the past year) seem sound. These projections consider the extent to which children were already at risk and their levels of access to alternative education during the closure period. Children with disabilities, for example, were already facing the biggest barrier to enrolment, with EMIS data suggesting only 16 per cent of children identified as having disabilities were in school before the start of the pandemic.⁶³ An assessment of 1,162 parents/caregivers of children with disabilities confirmed that only 14 per cent of the children surveyed had access to inclusive education resources during the school closures.⁶⁴

As part of its Consolidated Equity Strategy, Nepal has recently enrolled large numbers of children who were formerly out of school.⁶⁵ However, these children are at high risk of dropping out as household routines and support structures for returning to school after the pandemic are probably not yet rooted in daily life. Poverty is a known driver of disparity within education, and remittances – which contribute around 30 per cent of the country's GDP – have decreased dramatically.⁶⁶ Up to one third of Nepal's population are at risk of remaining/being pushed back into poverty.⁶⁷ The contingency plan's current projected scenario, in which 2.2 million additional children are unable to complete their education if not provided with additional support, is all too feasible.⁶⁸

In Nepal, where learning outcome levels are already low, particularly amongst the most disadvantaged members of society, this estimation causes particular concern. As mentioned above, one of the main aims of the SSDP is to increase learning outcomes but it seems likely that, despite efforts to support continuity of learning during school closures, there will still be children who fall even further behind expected levels of achievement because of the lack of daily face-to-face contact and protected space for learning that school provides.

The worsened economic hardship as a result of COVID-19 is likely to be disproportionately severe for children from marginalized groups related to challenges with participating successfully in distance learning (radio, TV and Internet), and the difficult conditions to learn using self-learning materials.

Data from UNICEF's monthly household survey in October 2020⁶⁹ found that 81 per cent of all children were continuing their studies in some form during school closure. Numbers varied across the country, with two provinces (Province 2 and Sudurpaschim) reporting the lowest numbers of children studying (68 per cent and 71 per cent, respectively). The other provinces reported above 81 per cent of children studying; Province 1 reported a figure of 89 per cent. Overall, this was a slight rise since August 2020.⁷⁰ In October, 18 per cent of children were studying in school, not just self-learning, which may go some way to explain the increase. The number of children who are not studying at all, however, remains a cause for concern. These were most likely to be boys aged 13–17.⁷¹

There is no data on the number of hours that children spent studying compared to the hours they spent in schools or the extent to which those children studying have actually learned. As a member of AIN remarked during consultations:

"Just because you hand out self-learning materials, doesn't mean the children are learning."⁷²

Across the country there is disparity in access to technology for learning, with a lack of equitable access to devices, the internet, TV and radio, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Mobile phone coverage is the most frequently available form of technology, with over 83 per cent ownership in all but two of the provinces (Karnali and Sudur Paschim). There is no breakdown of the type of mobile phone used, and mobile ownership does not guarantee access to remote teaching and learning opportunities, as basic and feature phones have limited functions. Only 51 per cent of all households access the internet from devices within their home, including via smart phones, with this only being around 25 per cent in the two provinces mentioned above.⁷³ Ownership of TV and radio is under 60 per cent. Karnali and Sudur Paschim have the lowest access to any form of technology. The government has taken this disparity into account with a seven-step plan to reach all children (described below).

Children without access to technology are at a disadvantage in terms of remote learning. This not only concerns broadcast and online lessons but also whether they are able to access phone support from their teachers to help them develop their understanding from the self-learning materials, solve problems and stay motivated. There were high pre-COVID-19 disparities in the distribution of teachers (see Figure 4), which will have translated into the ability of teachers to reach and support children during the school closure.

FIGURE 3 | ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY BY PROVINCE⁷⁴

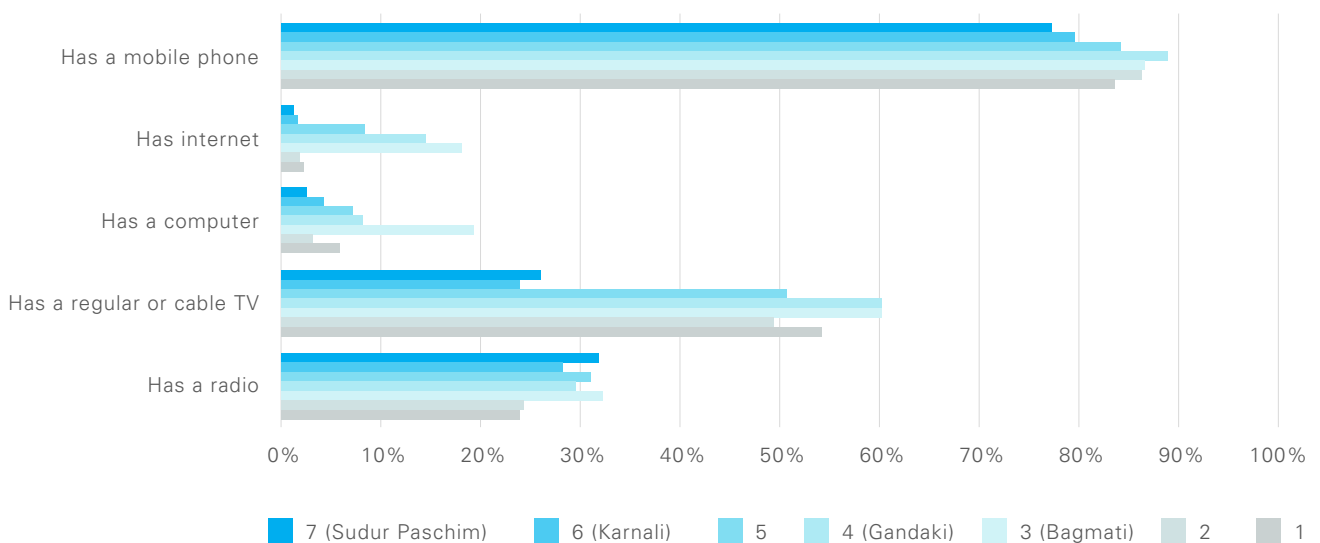
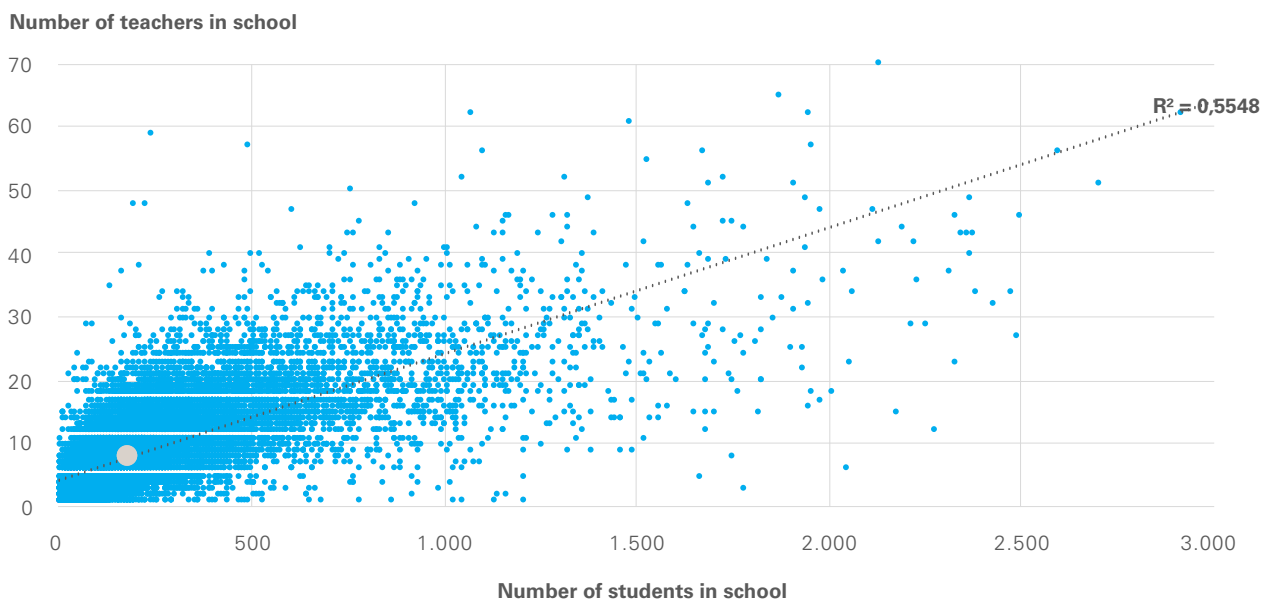


FIGURE 4 | NUMBERS OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS⁷⁵

This unevenness in teacher distribution means that there are both shortages and surpluses of teachers, and efforts have been made to deal with this situation (MoE 2016).⁷⁶ However, in 2019 there was a confirmed shortfall of 48,712 teachers in basic level (Grades 1–8), with an additional 10,857 teachers required for when schools exceed student quotas adjusted for their geographical location. At secondary level (Grades 9–12) there is a shortfall of 25,687 teachers.⁷⁷ These numbers do not take into account temporary teachers, so-called relief (Rahat) teachers or locally hired teachers. But they signal a large need, given that only permanent teachers are entitled to professional development and in-service training – proper training is vital if teachers are to support students both in school and through alternative methods during school closures. This shortfall can partly be addressed by redeploying the 16,039 teachers that are surplus within schools or local government area and by the \$19 million that has been budgeted in the current fiscal year to mobilize 6,000 volunteer teachers in areas with high teacher-student ratios.⁷⁸

As well as the challenge of access to resources, many children have had to respond to household demands. A VSO study of 1,235 adolescents found that 89 per cent of girls they interviewed are involved in household and/or

agricultural labour, a significant increase on pre-COVID-19 numbers.⁷⁹ Although this is only a small study in 23 municipalities, it is an indication of some the barriers to continued learning faced by girls.

Teachers

Teachers have had to take on new responsibilities and learn new skills to support remote learning, despite their own financial concerns and increased family responsibilities during lockdown. Teachers who facilitated the village learning groups (Tole classes, described below) expressed concern about the safety of home visits and contact classes, with school management committee (SMC) members commenting:

"It is important to link teachers with students and parents. We only ask teachers to carry out home visits but neither we provide them safety nor any motivational package in the current pandemic."⁸⁰

During the same consultation, stakeholders claimed some positive effects from the compulsory school closures:

- "Earlier, teacher-centred methods were considered but, due to COVID-19, student-centred teaching methodology has been a focus."

- “Teachers’ motivating factor is the sense of their own duty and responsibilities. If doctors are treating COVID-19 positive patients then as teachers we cannot sway away from our responsibilities and head teachers convince their teachers of their roles and responsibilities.”
- “Earlier when teachers came for training, they were not very serious but now since in the virtual mode a lot of effort is taken at the self-learning they seem to be engaged more.”⁸¹

One of the explanations for teachers using more learner-centred methods might be the growth of learning circles, introduced by schools, and Tole (village square) classes in the absence of classroom-based education. These arrangements involve teachers and facilitators working with small groups of students and they allow more time for individualized learning support.

There is an additional challenge for teachers who work far from home. In some areas, like Bajura, the majority of teachers need to travel back to their posts to resume school. Protocols are not standardized for testing, quarantining and isolating, so the risk of infection is increased when teachers come from another place – schools in one district in Bajura had to close again after six teachers tested positive.⁸²

The salary status of teachers is important for their well-being and retention. Government teachers’ salaries are earmarked under conditional grant federal funding, so they are still being paid, albeit late in many cases. However, some teachers at private schools have not been paid since January and some have been made redundant.⁸³

Safe learning environments

There is growing evidence that infection spreads mainly indoors in poorly ventilated spaces. Although it seems that children rarely get sick with COVID-19 themselves, they can infect others and overcrowded classrooms increase the risk of transmission. Ensuring that all schools are able to safeguard the health of students and teachers will require significant investment, with EMIS data confirming that, as of 2020, only 55 per cent of the more than 35,000 schools have girls’ toilets with running water. Although the 2019 multiple indicator cluster survey (MICS) confirmed that 81 per cent of the population has access to handwashing facilities with soap, there are large geographical disparities, with only 55 per cent in Karnali Province, for example, having access to such facilities.

“Community campaigns will be run by government with support from Education Cluster members to contain and minimize the spread of COVID-19 within education institutions and from these institutions into their catchment areas. These campaigns will raise awareness among students, teachers and parents about social distancing, self-isolation when feeling unwell, handwashing and hygiene in schools and the regular dissemination of information.”⁸⁴

School arrangements and facilities need to be sufficient to support these safety measures so that children and teachers are able to follow the guidelines and remain safe:

“It was difficult to maintain the social distance in schools. Distribution of safety toolkits in the COVID-19 situation was unfortunately not provided to the schools because of schools are overburdened with funding as well in an attempt to meet the safety protocols.”
– SMC comments during Joint Review Meeting (JRM) stakeholder consultations

In a number of local government areas, schools were used as quarantine centres while schools were closed. Up to January 2021, just over 50 per cent of these schools (2,431 schools out of 4,589) had been disinfected to provide a safe environment while reopening.⁸⁵

Although there has been progress during the SSDP period in upgrading water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities in schools, they are still insufficient. Over 3,500 schools do not have access to water sources, and more than half of the schools (55 per cent) do not have girls’ toilets with running water.⁸⁶ The provision of WASH facilities is particularly important in the current circumstances where good hygiene is a critical factor in preventing the spread of the virus. Addressing this is a major issue for the government as it requires substantial investment.

“Twenty per cent of government schools lack improved water and sanitation facilities, with an additional 19 per cent lacking separate toilets for girls and boys and menstrual hygiene management facilities.”⁸⁷

According to the Education Cluster Contingency Plan 2020, some parents may have concerns about sending their children back to school.

“Social stigmas can increase due to fear and lack of awareness, as well as fear for schools being a high-risk area in terms of getting infected (especially in those schools that lack adequate WASH facilities) causing hesitation among certain groups to send their children back to school.”⁸⁸

Health, well-being and child protection

Many factors have affected the ability of children to learn during school closures and put them at higher risk of dropping out once schools reopen. With schools closed and lockdown imposed throughout the country, it is predicted that there will be many negative effects on children's short- and long-term health and well-being. Increased financial pressures put stress on relationships and the spread of misinformation about the virus⁸⁹ is likely to raise anxiety levels amongst adults and children.

Children need a safe space in order to learn and for some children during school closures this was not possible. As well as missing out on learning, children were deprived of the critical social interaction and play with their peers,⁹⁰ which is vital for their development.

The health focus during this period has shifted to combating COVID-19. The health sector budget for 2020/21 has been significantly increased compared to the previous year to combat COVID-19 but vaccination programmes

and other campaigns, and the treatment of other diseases have been adversely affected.⁹¹ This has left many children without the basic healthcare needed to support healthy growth.

There are also concerns regarding nutrition. The UNICEF family tracker indicated that one in five households are struggling to meet key dietary requirements,⁹² which could have a detrimental health on children's long-term development.

Reported cases of domestic violence increased by more than 100 per cent in the first three months of the lockdown, and cases of rape or attempted rape also showed a substantial increase in this period.⁹³ Save the Children carried out a Rapid Needs Assessment in May 2020, in Karnali and Province 2. Table 1 shows the number of incidents of violence against children during lockdown.⁹⁴ Those interviewed felt that there was an increase in cases of violence against children during school closures, with children witnessing violent incidents.



TABLE 1 | INCIDENTS OF VIOLENCE DURING LOCKDOWN IN KARNALI AND PROVINCE 2

INCIDENTS OF VAC	KARNALI PROVINCE		PROVINCE 2		TOTAL	
	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%
Scolding	47	82%	83	89%	130	87%
Corporal punishment	25	44%	59	63%	84	56%
Neglect	2	4%	27	29%	29	19%
Child marriage	12	21%	15	16%	27	18%
Online abuse	0	0%	5	5%	5	3%
Suicide	1	2%	12	13%	13	9%
Others	1	2%	4	4%	5	3%
No. of respondents	57		93		150	

Concern has been expressed about child protection,⁹⁵ specifically around child marriage and the dowry system as well as discrimination between sons and daughters. In some areas, child marriage was said to have increased during the lockdown which might lead to student dropout.⁹⁶

Since mid-March 2020, 1,350 persons (including 319 children and 876 women) are reported to have died by suicide. Suicide among adolescent girls increased by almost 40 per cent during the four months of lockdown compared to the same duration the previous year, with some increase among boys, according to Nepal Police reports compiled for UNICEF.

Most of the negative health and well-being effects appear to have disproportionately affected girls and the youngest children, as access to basic healthcare and mechanisms for child protection have been vastly reduced at the same time as family pressures have increased.

Finance

The current per capita GDP is \$1,023, which puts Nepal just on the edge of the lower-middle-income country category,⁹⁷ although 19 per cent of the country still lives below the poverty line.⁹⁸ While the economy has shown signs of consistent growth over the last decade (5–8 per cent), the COVID-19 crisis has brought it to a near standstill.⁹⁹ This section explores the economic situation as far as it is relevant for the situation of children and the resourcing of education.

Education funding

"The government of Nepal has allocated a major proportion of the budget to the education sector, showing education is a priority."¹⁰⁰

In the 2019/2020 fiscal year Nepal allocated around 11 per cent of its national budget to education which, once allocations to federal and local government have been taken into account, led to an overall increase to 12 per cent.¹⁰¹

"Even with these increases, the SSDP remains underfunded and below national and international targets. The agenda to meet Nepal's constitutional commitments, transition to a federal structure, and increase access to quality education calls for significant increases in the education budget."¹⁰²

Of the 67 per cent allocated to the SSDP, 97 per cent was transferred directly to local government in the form of conditional implementation grants. In 2020, there was an additional budget line for COVID-19 response, but local government as a whole underspent in the financial year, mainly because of the interruption to regular development activities.¹⁰³

The ambitious decentralization reform begun in 2017 had already resulted in higher fiscal deficits and constrained service delivery, reflecting the transition of mandates to new local government. Public debt increased to 38 per cent of GDP in the 2020 financial year, with government struggling to raise revenues during lockdowns and needing funds for support measures. A cross-sectoral response covering employment, health, education, nutrition, sanitation etc. will be essential to minimize the effects of the pandemic and prevent larger groups in the population from deprivation.

Household finances

COVID-19-related disruptions in livelihoods and the contraction in household consumption are expected to have disproportionately affected the poor and vulnerable, including households engaged in informal activities.

"Survey results indicate that 28 per cent of men lost their jobs during the lockdown, compared to 41 per cent of women. Although only 32 per cent of workers have lost their jobs, 74 per cent have not been paid since the lockdown started. Increased responsibility at home due to closure of schools and day-care affects working mothers. Gender pay gaps compound the inequality – in Nepal, for every 100 rupees that a man earns, a woman earns only 70 rupees."¹⁰⁴

The pandemic has caused migration patterns to change. Poor daily-wage labourers depend on regular work to afford urban living costs – without work, their savings disappear quickly and they have no choice but to leave, mostly to their home village. This has an impact on school enrolment, as their children need to be accommodated in village schools once these families have returned home. At the same time the return of migrant workers, mostly from India and the Gulf States, has put further strains on household and village resources.

Nepal is highly dependent on remittances from migrant labour abroad, which are worth over a quarter of its GDP.¹⁰⁵ This dependency on money earned outside the country means livelihoods are particularly vulnerable to the border closures associated with COVID-19. After a sharp dip, overseas remittances to Nepal started rising again between July and September 2020, suggesting initial signs of economic recovery.¹⁰⁶ However, there is considerable uncertainty about the future as slower global economic growth will have an impact on employment opportunities in the destination countries. Remittances to Nepal are predicted to decline by 12 per cent in 2020.¹⁰⁷ The migrant situation has an impact on the household income and social environment of the parents, all of which can affect parents' ability to keep their children in school.

In 2016, around 45 per cent of education was funded through public sources,¹⁰⁸ but the largest source of funding for education (49 per cent) was from parents,¹⁰⁹ which includes expenditure such as payments to schools,

uniforms, and textbooks. For the 32 per cent of children who attend private schools,¹¹⁰ parents also pay fees. Fees equate to 2 per cent of household expenditure for the poorest quintile to 6 per cent for the richest households.¹¹¹ With the livelihoods and incomes of many families being significantly affected by COVID-19, this proportion may increase or, more likely, education may be de-prioritized in favour of basic needs such as food. This could lead to more children wanting to access government schools, driving up student-teacher ratios and putting more pressure on the system. Teachers from private schools may find themselves unemployed as demand decreases.

In August 2020, the UNICEF monthly survey found that:

- Over 90 per cent of surveyed families reported need for additional cash to support their children.
- Over 90 per cent of households in the lowest income groups, including those who had no earnings, emphasized this need.
- 60 per cent of highest-income households also reported needing additional cash for their children. Most of them could be among those who lost employment and had no earnings during lockdown.¹¹²

2.3 Challenges

The pandemic created the following challenges:

- Minimizing learning loss during a long period of school closure – all children needed to have opportunities and materials to help them study. Technology can provide a solution for some children, but as access to the internet and TV is low the government had to find alternative solutions with the potential to reach all children, including the most disadvantaged.
- Keeping teachers motivated and involved in students' learning. Most teachers were not prepared for the switch in learning modalities, and many were also dealing with increased family pressures and suffered anxiety about face-to-face contact.
- Coordination mechanisms, timing and implementation capacity. With responsibilities for providing alternative methods of learning and reopening schools shared between the federal, provincial and local governments, these needed to be robust.

2.4 Education sector response to COVID-19 and support to continuity of learning

JRM stakeholder consultations emphasized the importance of coordination between the three tiers of government. To ensure a comprehensive response the federal government supported local government by providing guidelines on the response, holding consultative meetings, providing additional funds and requesting the MoF to send funds directly to municipalities.¹¹³ The Nepal Education Cluster quickly developed the COVID-19 Contingency Plan, which was approved within a month of school closure and included costed scenarios, case loads and projections based on school and population census. The development of alternative learning resources (course books for the self-learning packs and the online learning portal) followed soon after the approval of the contingency plan, and provincial cluster mechanisms were activated. This is especially commendable given that there were no established intergovernmental coordination mechanisms that directly connected federal line ministries with provincial governments at the time. The development of alternative learning guidelines and the school disinfection guidelines took slightly longer but were timely given the challenging context and unchartered territory. The approval of the school reopening framework took longer, partly because this involved high-level decisions on the devolvement of the mandate to reopen schools to local government.

Access to and participation in learning

"The federal government will continue to closely collaborate with the provincial and local governments to (i) make online and media learning resources available for those children that have access to internet, radio, TV and mobile phones, and (ii) development and distribution of learning packs for those children that do not have access to these resources and will be at the highest risk of having their learning disrupted. This will include tailored approaches based on need of, for example, children living with disabilities and other children identified with pre-existing vulnerabilities."¹¹⁴

With schools closed, the government had to consider how to ensure that students continued learning. Online learning has advantages in terms of its reach and the possibility of providing regular (virtual) updates. But given the low levels of internet coverage, the government were aware of the need to provide alternative approaches to reach as many children as possible.

Categories of response for learning

1. Students who have access to all services
2. Students who have access to internet
3. Students who have access to computer or mobile phones but no (regular/stable) access to internet
4. Students who have access to mobile phones (non-smart phones)
5. Students who have access to TV and/or radio
6. Students who do not have access to any of the above
7. Students who have additional needs

They therefore developed a multi-pronged approach with different modalities for different groups of children, depending on their access to electricity and connectivity, as shown in the text box.¹¹⁵

Several local governments launched radio programmes and TV learning, and distributed self-learning packs for those who did not have access to the internet. With their knowledge of local challenges, some municipalities adapted approaches according to need. For example, one official¹¹⁶ mentioned that once they realized that not enough radios were available to households, they distributed self-learning packs to students. However, they felt that there were still specific challenges in reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized, and they needed more support in implementing inclusive activities.

The Nepal Education Cluster reported the following achievements across 205 local governments, mainly in Provinces 2, 5, 6 and 7 to support learning during COVID-19:

- 2,305 schools used as quarantine, isolation or holding centres have been disinfected.
- 210,546 self-learning packs have been distributed to children who have no access to the other alternative learning resources.
- 2,767 teachers were reached through various training courses including alternative learning modalities, COVID-19- related safety, school reopening and digital skills.
- 60,059 children were reached with home-based learning support.
- 1,284 video lessons and 633 audio lessons were produced and disseminated.¹¹⁷

Local government stakeholders mentioned the distribution of self-learning packs as a key achievement.¹¹⁸ In a consultation with AIN,¹¹⁹ one member mentioned that whilst handing out self-learning packs was good first step, it was clear from several surveys that simply having access to learning materials is not enough, and many children have disengaged with them.

Whilst devolving responsibility to local level is in line with the new structure and potentially facilitates a more targeted response, it requires strong coordination. As this was an unprecedented situation, both federal and local governments needed time to organize themselves and get the right people and materials into place to provide a comprehensive response. This was a challenge to both tiers and inevitably took time. The directive for local government to organize the learning response arrived in September, five months after school closures. This caused some difficulties,¹²⁰ but there were many successes too (Figure 5).

INGOs also report a wide range of support initiatives in the area of remote learning. While these initiatives cover only a fraction of the total need, INGOs effectively measured the reach and concluded that there are successful approaches worth replicating.¹²¹

"Getting Communities Connected- one education officer highlighted that they recognized connectivity was an issue in their local government so they have been working to establish WIFI zones (Parsagadi Municipality in Province 2). This is a good example of an effective immediate response, which also creates a solution for the longer term."¹²²

There are good examples of stakeholders collaborating, such as local governments forming a coalition with teachers, education journalists, NGOs and local radio stations to launch a distance radio programme, as is happening in five districts. During the consultations with CSOs it was stated that 100,000 children were reached through a radio programme supported with a communication and awareness campaign to increase participation, such as making phone calls, organizing quiz contests, and through social media discussions.¹²³

These alternative measures have been partially successful. The CEHRD developed contingency monitoring mechanisms to track the percentage of students using the different alternative learning modalities (Table 2) – teachers remain the most used modality (35 per cent of all children), followed by printed material, including the self-learning packs developed with support from the Nepal Education Cluster (25 per cent). Again, the large disparities in terms of the access of children from vulnerable groups are hidden within these percentages, with for example, children with disabilities reported to have far less access to these modalities.¹²⁴

FIGURE 5 | SUMMARY OF REPORTED SUCCESS FROM JRM STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS



50 per cent attendance in Zoom classes.



Nepal Telecom's 'Happy Learning' package has been widely utilized.



Teachers have promoted **alternative methods** through phone calls to parents.



Teachers with strong **digital competency** have supported their colleagues.



Teachers **have implemented a range of strategies** to continue learning, including textbook distribution, phone calls, use of messenger, Zoom calls/classes, and promoting self-learning (through parents and students).



Most schools are **conducting weekly staff coordination meetings**.

TABLE 2 | PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS USING DIFFERENT LEARNING MODALITIES¹²⁵

LEARNING MODALITY	%
Teacher working with small group in community / school	35
Printed materials provided by local government / school	26
Broadcast by Radio Nepal	13
Broadcast by NTV	11
Computer without internet connection	9
Learning portal	6

The summary of JRM stakeholder conversations noted that challenges remained.

"Fifty per cent of students are not engaging with Zoom classes and, in the most disadvantaged households, relatives lack the education to support their children. Teachers are overburdened in some areas (e.g. one school with 2,700 students has just 33 teachers). Teachers are concerned that pedagogy has become less student-centred, younger children are less likely to be engaged in learning, and there are questions about how students can be assessed to certify grade progression."¹²⁶

These initiatives have gone a long way to support students to study. But there is little data on the extent of success in each province, or on how much children have learned through these modalities – much of the information is either small scale or anecdotal. Systematic monitoring and reporting, along with the development of assessment mechanisms, are essential so that local government can ensure guidelines are being followed and can understand the extent to which children in their area have been supported to study.

The collection and analysis of this information should help learn lessons for the future and make learning continuity resilient to any further shocks. Monitoring is discussed further in Chapter 3.

Teachers

Various initiatives supported teachers to use the new learning modalities, such as information and communications technology (ICT) training given by the National Association of Teachers and directives to teachers to support alternative methods of learning (Figure 6). Teachers interviewed as part of the JRM stakeholder consultation said that some of them had been trained on safety protocol and that there had been weekly staff meetings in school so they could then make regular home visits to support learning, going some way to address their concerns.

There is little information as to the size, scale and timing of these initiatives to support teachers. This suggests that coordination of teacher training could have been stronger to build the skills and confidence of teachers during this period.

FIGURE 6 | KEY ACHIEVEMENTS – NEPAL EDUCATION CLUSTER¹²⁷



2,767 teachers and education stakeholders trained on alternative learning modalities, COVID-19-related safety and digital skills.



1,156 teachers and education stakeholders trained on psychosocial support.

Safe learning environments

Reopening schools

From November 2020, when MoEST devolved the decisions to open schools to local government, municipalities brought the national standards procedures based on local risk assessments into operation. The final framework for reopening schools was approved on 5 November 2020. These guidelines gave decision-making powers and management responsibilities to local government (in collaboration with each district COVID-19 response management centre) on reopening dates, phased and staggered reopening, and ensuring schools that had been used for quarantining were disinfected.

Local government commented that they could have responded better had the guidance come sooner, but that some used their initiative to plan and prepare for reopening.¹²⁸

"If the guidelines are circulated from the centre as early as possible, it will be easier for the local governments to enact, develop their own and work accordingly because the local level do not have much technical experts as the centre and thus they expect guidance from the centre. When it was delaying us to receive guidelines from the centre, we searched the internet for different guideline and built up our own."¹²⁹

Other provincial stakeholders in Karnali highlighted the problem caused by delays:

"No federal act as of now, which is causing us hindrance on moving ahead. We developed our plan and acted but this is not practically possible if the federal act is not endorsed. We have been waiting for too long now for the act to be endorsed."¹³⁰

Local governments are implementing the new directive at different speeds. As of now 76 per cent of schools have been reopened, although there are some reports that schools are being closed again as transmission has increased.

There is a concern that variation in local oversight and resources could lead to poor safety standards in under-serviced municipalities. One local government officer commented:

"Monitoring is, however, weak from the local governments as well."¹³¹

In ensuring that the reopening of schools goes well, common standards to achieve uniformity in safety and quality of learning in schools across the country, along with strong communication and monitoring mechanisms, are necessary. To address this, school disinfection guidelines were developed and disseminated by the Nepal Education Cluster.

FIGURE 7 | KEY ACHIEVEMENTS – NEPAL EDUCATION CLUSTER¹³²



2,431 schools used as quarantine centres cleaned and disinfected.



WASH facilities installed/repaired in 148 schools

Messaging

Comprehensive WASH messaging has been launched throughout the country. One of the more far-reaching approaches has been through multi-lingual public service announcements, aired on over 400 radio stations.¹³³ This is encouraging as the UNICEF family tracker (August 2020) indicates that radio is the most trusted source of information.¹³⁴ By November, UNICEF were reporting that health messages had reached 15 million people through radio, television, call-back tone, online and print media.¹³⁵ NGOs and INGOs have also played an important role in delivering WASH messages. For example, the Nepal Red Cross Society has formed 174 groups working across provinces to deliver health messages such as spitting and sneezing etiquette.¹³⁶

Health and well-being

Throughout the response there has been a wide range of initiatives to support the health and well-being of children. Mental health and psychosocial support has been mainly addressed through civil society and INGOs.

The government and NGOs are running helplines to provide support over the phone; they have also been broadcasting radio messages around the vulnerability of children.¹³⁷ In November 2020 UNICEF reported that 2,520 people (1,306 males, 1,168 females and 46 third gender) were reached with individual psychosocial counselling service through existing helplines, online platforms and one-to-one counselling.¹³⁸ They were also able to follow up people with suicidal thoughts or who had experienced gender-based violence. However, one local government official expressed concern that they were unable to address the mental health problem.

"On the social part, counselling has been one of the key agendas that needs to be addressed. Counselling might be needed for students, teachers and also parents."
– Local government representative, JRM stakeholder discussions

Nepal lacks an adequate referral and monitoring system, which makes it challenging to protect children during an emergency. Child protection issues have been flagged by several INGOs including World Vision and Save the Children. According to several needs assessments and situation reports, this gap in the system has mainly been filled through local government coordinating with international and local NGOs. This leads to an uneven response and heightens inequality, as provision depends on the quality of the engagement in each locality.



Community participation

The importance of partnerships with CSOs and NGOs during the response was reiterated in the November 2020 Joint Sector Review.¹³⁹ The 40 member organizations of AIN together supported education in more than 500 of the 753 municipalities, covering nearly half of Nepal's more than 35,000 public schools. And support provided through the CSO networks in the Nepal Local Education Group through the Nepal Education Cluster (covering 270 municipalities) has been a vital part of the pandemic response. Efforts have included providing alternative learning resources (online, offline and printed), advocacy, monitoring, research, community mobilization, creating policy forums and running awareness programmes. The National Teacher's Association (NTA), the NCE, the local Red Cross Society and various youth associations have also played an important role in mobilizing communities and distributing learning materials. Many municipalities have worked with local communities to raise awareness about accessing radio, TV and online content.

It was noted by an official during local government consultation that alternative learning was more effective in areas with active SMCs, as the reopening guidelines give SMCs the responsibility for preparing schools for reopening – the committees are expected to mobilize resources and ensure that the schools are safe places for children to learn.

Some INGOs, such as Plan International, Save the Children and World Vision, have conducted rapid needs assessments. Sharing was ensured through the provincial clusters, although it is not yet clear to what extent the rapid needs assessments have directed government responses.

Financial response

The financial response was aimed at households to ease pressure on families, and directly at education to support the development of alternative modalities of learning and the creation of safe learning environments so that schools could be reopened.

Education financing

Finance for the education response to the pandemic came from various sources and was allocated through a range of government mechanisms.

1. With a funding gap of between NPR 7.17 billion and NPR 16 billion (\$58.7 million and \$132.4 million), depending on which approach they took to the response, the MoF requested additional support from all the Joint Finance Partners and Development Partners. The World Bank (for higher education), GPE, Finland and USAID¹⁴⁰ all committed funds.
2. Some funds from SSDP (around \$30 million) were redirected for purposes including:
 - » online teacher training
 - » additional funding of online and distance learning materials
 - » distribution of sanitary pads for girls in grades 6–12.
3. All local governments received funding for the COVID-19 response, both in the last trimester of the 2019/20 fiscal year, and as part of the 2020/21 fiscal year annual workplan and budget in August 2020. Some of these funds were released through conditional education grants and some were allocated for local government to use across different sectors. This was

because it was realized that the COVID-19 response could deplete the resources usually available to address the impact on education of other disasters (floods, earthquakes, landslides) that occur regularly in Nepal.

- » \$1.5 million was transferred to local government to develop, transmit/broadcast and produce/print learning materials for students.
- » \$850,000 was allocated to each province as emergency funds to be utilized for COVID-19 or other disasters as required.
- » \$95,000 was reallocated to produce additional audio and audio-visual lessons to support continued learning using the online government learning portal.
- » Budget allocations were also made for developing, producing and broadcasting lessons through radio and television.

Local governments also had equalization grant budgets and revenues that they could utilize.

1. The government applied for \$10.85 million from GPE funding to support the response. A significant amount of this (\$4.66 million) was allocated specifically to support 100 municipalities selected according to need and COVID-19 prevalence. This allocation was for the following activities according to identified need (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3):

- » Preparation of specific local government education response plan;
- » Welcome to School Campaign focussing on marginalized students and girls;
- » Sanitization of schools and implementation of health protocols;

- » Hygiene materials, including for handwashing;
- » Minor refurbishment of WASH facilities;
- » Counselling and socio-emotional support to students, parents and teachers;
- » Formative assessments of students post-COVID-19. The activities are fully aligned with the government's Annual Strategic Implementation Plan and the Annual Work Plans and Budgets (ASIP/AWPB) priorities for 2020/21 and extracted from the MoEST's joint emergency plan for school education.

Household finances

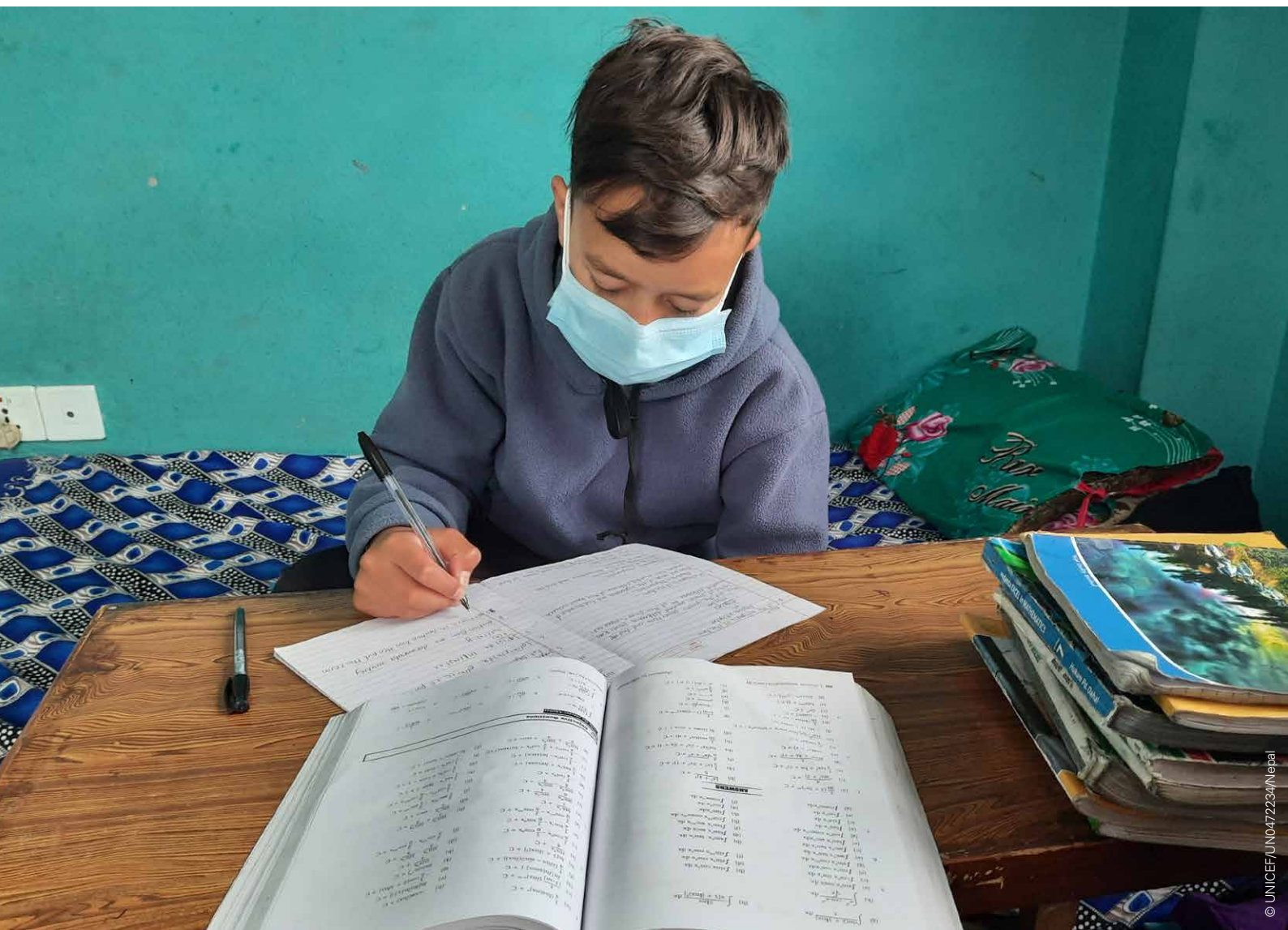
- Twenty-one per cent of households received financial or material assistance from the government after the first lockdown was imposed.
- More low-income families than higher-income groups received government assistance.
- Province 2 has the highest percentage of households receiving government financial or material assistance.¹⁴¹

Federal relief programmes were launched in response to COVID-19. They included cash or food for workers; loan offers to businesses; extension of tax payment deadlines; and rebates on utility bills.¹⁴² The MoF committed to expand the Universal Child Grant to 11 new districts – this will benefit an estimated 415,000 children and their families, many living in COVID-19 hotspots where economic activity is curtailed.



03

Thematic deep dive: Strengthening local government in education service delivery



Since the introduction of the decentralized federal structure based on the 2015 Constitution of Nepal, provincial and local governments have been given large and distinct mandates in education delivery and management.

3.1 Ongoing debate on education delivery and local government

Since the introduction of the decentralized federal structure based on the 2015 Constitution of Nepal, provincial and local governments have been given large and distinct mandates in education delivery and management. Earlier, regional education directorates and district education officers were directly under the central government. Under the new arrangements many sectors, including education, needed to realign their institutional set up, governance and service-delivery mechanisms. Mechanisms for communication, coordination and collaboration among government entities and across government tiers needed to be established to deal with the shared responsibilities. Since the establishment of the local and provincial governments through elections in 2017 and 2018, legislation – listed below – has been introduced to make constitutional provisions, facilitate intergovernmental coordination and collaboration, and support provincial and local government to unpack and operationalize their exclusive and concurrent powers.

- **The Local Government Operation Act** (2017) covers local-level governance and the unbundling of functions, including provisions for the management of the transition to a fully-fledged federal system. The act elaborates on the shared and divided responsibilities between the three levels of government.
- **The 2017 Civil Servants' Adjustment Act** (2019) and its regulations legislate the balance between the organizational structures of provincial and local government and their working modalities, as well as balancing the accountability of local government staff with their flexibility. The act facilitated the organizational restructuring of employees at local, provincial and federal levels.

- **The 2017 Intergovernmental Fiscal Framework** (2017) is important for the effectiveness of the new federal system of governance. The framework was followed by the Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfer Management Act (IFMA) (MoF 2017), which sets out the provisions on revenue (re)distribution across the three tiers of government.
- **The Natural Resource and Fiscal Commission Act** (2017) specifies the establishment and operationalization of the Natural Resource and Fiscal Commission. The commission has devised a formula (based on parameters such as geographic area, population, cost of service delivery, incidence of poverty and ability to generate financial resources) for distributing grants to sub-national governments. The act includes four types of grant:
 - » **Fiscal equalization grants** are extended on the basis of the funding requirements of local governments and provinces, and their ability to generate revenue. They are intended to fill the gap between resource needs and potential to generate revenue.
 - » **Conditional grants** are provided based on the situation of infrastructure, national policies, programmes, norms and standards. These are mainly earmarked grants provided to local governments for specific purposes, including all activities under the SSDP.
 - » **Complementary grants** are provided to provinces and local bodies for specific projects, including infrastructure projects, based on their feasibility and cost. Factors such as a project's impact on society, the availability of required financial, physical and human resources, and a project's importance are taken into account while extending these grants.

- » **Special grants** are extended to provide specific basic public services, such as education and health, and to promote socio-economic development in 'left-behind' communities, for example to increase literacy in specific locations.
- These acts were followed in 2018 by **the Appropriation Act and Allocation Act** (2018), which further regulate fund disbursement, reporting and the maintenance of fiscal discipline.
- The 2019 **Free and Compulsory Education Act** (2019) details the roles and responsibilities of local government to provide free and compulsory education to all children in Nepal up to grade 8. The act notes that local government should develop local information systems to collect and update data on children, including children with disabilities. Based on the needs identified by the data, local government should then support the provision of education for all students.
- The 2019 **Federal Education Policy** (2019) commits to providing appropriate education opportunities for children with disabilities. The policy adopts the key commitments and content of the former Inclusive Education Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2016). The policy conceptualizes 'inclusive education' as a tool to bring not only children with disabilities, but all types of disadvantaged children into mainstream schools. This includes Dalits (the lowest caste), marginalized groups, street children, ethnic and language minorities, the socio-culturally oppressed, trafficked children, bonded child labour, children with emotional difficulties, girls, conflict-affected children, orphans and children in remote areas.

Despite the existence of all these individual laws, the overall legislative framework – the Federal Education Act – is still only in draft form, awaiting parliamentary approval.

The earlier system, often referred to as the 'unitary' system, largely depended on central instruction and uniform solutions. This led to rigidity and an inability to contextualize local government management interventions in this highly diverse country. The aim of decentralization is to establish stronger mechanisms of local accountability, with elected councils at municipality and provincial levels making the key decisions.

The federal structure and devolution of mandates in the education sector seems to be done with the intention of strengthening accountability and service delivery. Communities are now enabled to influence the priorities of local plans and actions, and decisions are made locally. For the education sector, this meant that local government has become fully responsible for managing schools, including buildings, teacher salaries and other types of support.

Consultations with a range of stakeholders and a review of published reports, documents and local news articles indicated that local government needed to address the following issues before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **A shortage of skilled teachers:**¹⁴³ there are major disparities in student-teacher ratios across the country. This is one of the most important indicators of the ability to provide child-centred and quality education. The high student-teacher ratios, especially in the Terai, indicate an urgent need for more teachers. It is the role of the federal government to appoint teachers but, pre-COVID-19, local government and schools had taken a range of initiatives to tackle the undersupply of teachers. Whilst these addressed the immediate problem, they had implications for the longer term. For example, merging schools adversely affected the catchment areas, increasing student-teacher ratios and the amount of travelling for children. Schools hired additional teachers locally from their own resources, which leads to further disparities as not all schools have the resources to do this.
- **Inadequate school monitoring:** The bi-annual Flash reports generated from the EMIS are a good rapid source of information on the status of schools, including students and teachers, but a more continuous and systematic monitoring of schools is also required. Many local governments still face issues in accessing and using data for school management, with internet connectivity being reported as a major challenge.¹⁴⁴
- **Municipal staff shortages:** Many municipalities do not have sufficient expertise and staff to meet their school management mandate.¹⁴⁵
- **Lack of equity:** There is continuing concern that the most vulnerable communities and students do not receive an acceptable standard of education. This is also relevant in relation to appropriate schooling for children with disabilities.¹⁴⁶

Constraints in the local government capacity to address these issues were flagged:

- » The extent to which municipalities are able to perform their education management mandate varies widely –some are much better prepared and resourced than others. The activities to structurally improve quality of education and learning are generally still too limited. Delivering a consistent standard of facilities, quality and learning achievement is challenging.
- » The absence of formal communication mechanisms means that there are often information gaps between government levels, such as when tracking expenditure and fiscal and financial progress under conditional grants, and contributions from equalization grants at local and provincial level.
- » There is a general lack of capacity in complex planning and budgeting, both annual and multi-year. Local government does not usually have the capacity or agency to undertake evidence-based planning and prioritization, which can lead to failure to utilize the available budget.

Several sources, including a federal government official,¹⁴⁷ pointed out that some of the challenges are caused by the delay in approving the Federal Education Act, which leads to lack of clarity on the legal mechanisms and

operationalization of the municipal responsibilities. The mechanism of support from other layers of government (e.g., provinces on teacher education) have not yet been established, so municipalities are still working out the practicalities of teacher management, salary payment, repairing, maintaining and constructing school buildings etc. The Democracy Resource Centre report on school education and local government highlights that the absence of an approved Education Act still hinders local government trying to formulate their own policies and rules for school management.¹⁴⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges for each layer of government at a time when decentralization was not yet fully operational, as it immediately changed priorities and created an urgent need for action. Local governments faced contextual challenges and had uneven capacity to manage the response comprehensively. There were differing levels of connectivity and resources to respond; access to communities in some areas is difficult because of the topography; in some areas there was added pressure on the system and resources because of returning migrants. COVID-19 therefore increased and intensified existing disparities in education outcomes within and between local governments.



3.2 Perspectives on the COVID-19 response in education management

In March 2020, when schools were ordered to close, 85 per cent (630 out of 753) of all local governments had deployed education officers as per the federal human resource requirement (MoEST 2020).¹⁴⁹ The remaining 123 municipalities (most of them understood to be in Province 2) had not yet appointed education officers (the target in the SSDP was for this to be done by July 2021). Although placement of education officers is increasing, human resources do not yet match the workload generated by the increased mandate, particularly in municipalities with large vulnerable populations. The relatively new, and in some places under-resourced, local governments, had to respond in many different ways to the emergency, challenging their capacity to manage what was an unprecedented and unique situation.

Relieving the shortages of health workers and other key personnel was initially considered the most urgent priority.¹⁵⁰ Many municipalities also had to deal directly with health and safety arrangements such as setting up and managing quarantine centres, particularly in areas such as Karnali and Suduparschim¹⁵¹ that received large numbers of returning migrants. They had to procure polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test materials, set up track and trace systems, and procure large amounts of medical supplies etc.

Municipalities were responsible for managing the closures and reopening of schools. While schools were closed (March–November 2020), some municipalities decided that low or no local prevalence of COVID-19 justified reopening their schools.¹⁵² Others decided to allow schools to operate classes in small groups in order to create a safe space for students to learn.

Local government had significant responsibility for addressing the COVID-19 crisis but depended on central government support (for guidelines, release of funding etc.) so it was not always possible to fast-track support to schools. Existing support mechanisms were used, new ones created, and guidance was provided to support local officials managing the response.

The Foundation for Development Management and Nepal Institute for Policy Research report¹⁵³ commented that despite the limitations of local governments they were able to find local solutions and mobilize resources to provide a rapid response to the crisis. This is borne out in education (as described in Chapter 2) by the way in which

municipalities used local knowledge and understanding to adapt resources for alternative learning modalities to reach as many learners as possible.

Planning and budgeting

"The performance of local government was also found to be a deciding factor in management of the pandemic. In Province 1 for instance, the proactivity of local government with support from NGOs and CSOs was one of the reasons why the management of pandemic had been effective."¹⁵⁴

Each local government faced unique challenges, and the task was more straightforward for some than for others.

Local governments received the emergency budget in May 2020, and developed specific local response plans, although not all of them included education specifically. In consultations, many municipalities commented that they were eager to support education, but they lacked funds.¹⁵⁵ On the other hand, it is known that local governments do not always spend all of the available budget.¹⁵⁶ This reinforces the point that local government needs to be better supported in planning, budgeting and implementation to improve local education delivery and management.

Municipalities are still highly dependent on central government funds, as most revenues are raised by the federal government, and ministries set conditions on the funding they provide. With the adoption of the joint COVID-19 education response plan in August 2020, assistance under the humanitarian response was shifted to sector planning within the education sector-wide approach (SWAP) under the MoEST. For the 2020/21 fiscal year, the government re-allocated budget to address the effects of the pandemic (detailed in Chapter 2). Based on these allocations, local governments have mainstreamed their COVID-19 response in their seven-step annual planning and budgeting for the present financial year (starting in July 2020). Updates are shared in national and provincial clusters.

The 2020/21 project implementation manuals, the annual strategic implementation plan, and the annual work plans and budgets have been aligned with the bottom-up seven-step municipal planning process and the local government COVID-19 emergency response plans. A mechanism is now needed to ensure systematic reporting against these plans – the cluster mechanism has partly provided an alternative for this that could be formalized.

Collaboration

Since the COVID-19 crisis started, collaboration between stakeholders (including the various layers of government) has intensified, prompted by the urgency need to support schools and communities dealing with the consequences of the school closures. The government-led Nepal Education Cluster (NEC), which included all national stakeholders and was supported by international organisations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and a number of INGOs, has intensively coordinated the response. Provinces initiated local clusters of stakeholders to support municipalities more directly.

As the government did not declare a national emergency, there was no activation of the Humanitarian Country Team as was done during previous national disasters, such as the 2015 earthquakes. Instead, sectoral clusters (most of which, including the NEC, were already active, due to the regular occurrence of disasters in Nepal) were asked to develop contingency plans that were consolidated into a Country Preparedness and Response Plan by the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) and the UN Resident Coordinator Office (RCO), which coordinated the COVID-19 response on behalf of the government and development agencies and missions to Nepal, respectively.

The National Education Cluster, led by the CEHRD, promoted the establishment of the provincial clusters, which included representatives from provincial and local governments, Education Development Coordination Units (EDCUs), and development agencies (including United Nations agencies, INGOs and CSOs). The intensified interaction in the provincial clusters demonstrated the potential for more effective coordination between the different levels of government in terms of ongoing education management as well as the COVID-19 response.¹⁵⁷

The MoEST developed the 2020/21 Programme Implementation Manual to give local-level guidance on implementing activities in the annual strategic implementation plan, including those designed to respond to COVID-19 and support alternative education. An additional implementation manual was developed for the 100 local governments selected to receive additional pandemic funding from the GPE education sector grant described in Chapter 2.

Monitoring

Monitoring in the education sector was an area linked to decentralization, so monitoring during the pandemic presented specific challenges. The government's EMIS monitors school-level data and there are many initiatives to strengthen local government's ability to use data for educational planning at different levels.

Since the transition from a manual system to an electronic (excel-based) system, the EMIS allows all student-level data (including scholarships, attendance and annual performance), plus information on teachers, non-teaching staff and physical infrastructure, to be tracked over time. From the beginning of the 2018/19 school year, all schools and local governments uploaded their Flash data directly to the Integrated Educational Management Information System (IEMIS) web portal (iemis.doe.gov.np). Local government education personnel, provincial government and EDCUs received their login credentials from the CEHRD, then provide these credentials to the schools in their municipality. Schools without computers and electricity use facilities at nearby schools or the local government education office to upload their data. Online guidance is available for schools on how to upload their data. The transition meant that schools could continue using the macro-enabled excel files for reporting their data offline and report into the online mechanism by using their unique user accounts and passwords.

Access to data is a priority for school decision-makers. To facilitate this, the web-based IEMIS allows schools to upload, manage, view and use data on education indicators; local governments can view and use data, and monitor the status of schools in their municipality. EDCUs can view the status of schools in their districts, and Provincial Ministries of Social Development (PMSD) and Education Development Directorates (EDDs) can view information on the schools in their provinces. Finally, MoEST and CEHRD staff can access the EMIS information on all schools nationwide.¹⁵⁸

The pandemic school closures posed a challenge for schools trying to complete their regular EMIS reporting. A contingency mechanism was developed and linked to the EMIS by the CEHRD in July 2020 to ensure the government was able to monitor education by different means. This reporting mechanism allowed municipalities to report whether schools were closed, partially open or had adopted alternative modalities to support children's learning.

One of the gaps in the system is the monitoring of learning outcomes during the school closures. This is a complex process which would require an ongoing assessment system within remote learning. The response by national and local government was developed quickly – it understandably focussed on reaching as many learners as possible, rather than considering how to find out what they had learned. Once schools reopen, however, assessing children and tracking learning achievement will be critical for future national and local planning – it will be important to plan for the resources needed to bring children back in line with expected learning levels.

As mentioned above, the government has included a number of priorities in their 2020/21 annual strategic implementation plan and annual work plan and budget to facilitate planning of both regular sector activities and those specially focussed on the COVID-19 response. One such activity is the roll out of the nationwide tracking and monitoring of access, retention and completion of individual students, with this data being uploaded into the EMIS. The planned introduction of a digital enrolment recording system will be an important mechanism to monitor children's return to school. It will generate electronic ID numbers to establish online links with health office records of child births and deaths to capture out-of-school children in the central EMIS.

Strengthening the capacity to use data for planning purposes is also envisioned, as SMCs jointly plan with teachers and local stakeholders using the school improvement plan tool with evidence generated from EMIS data. This evidence will also support incorporating school safety, planning for educational continuity, building response and preparedness capacities, and reaching out to communities.

These initiatives have the potential to transform the way that education is planned at local government and school levels. But in order to optimize the use of data by local governments, it will be essential to accompany these initiatives with ongoing training and support for all users, along with the development of strong two-way feedback mechanisms.

In addition to the efforts undertaken by the CEHRD to ensure access to real-time data for planning and monitoring of alternative modalities, the Education Review Office (ERO) of the MoEST is also initiating a study to determine the loss of learning caused by the school closures and inform strategies for accelerated learning programmes to allow children to regain lost ground.

As a temporary measure to monitor the overall well-being of children during the pandemic, UNICEF initiated the Family Tracker Survey, which also captured data on children's learning during the school closures. The tracker is based on a

sampling methodology (7,500 households across the country) that provides a picture of the national and provincial situations but not for specific local governments.

3.3 Analysis

There have been genuine efforts and commitment at all levels of the education sector to minimize learning loss while keeping children, teachers and parents safe during the pandemic. Although still in the process of decentralization, local governments, with support, have responded to the crisis and managed to some extent to provide education within a difficult context (successes around access and participation are discussed in Chapter 2). The country also experienced unique challenges, such as the thousands of Nepalese labour migrants returning from India over the southern border, many of them contracting COVID-19 on their long journey home, and thousands of other Nepalese leaving urban areas as the demand for labour halted due to the lockdown, which put further strain on rural resources and capacity.

Perhaps one of the key factors was that Nepal had recently gone through a massive transition in its state structure, and elected local governments have only had two years' education planning and budgeting experience in their newly extensive mandate. In this context, the readiness of local governments to engage in the response and the frequent virtual meetings held between federal, provincial and local government levels in the education sector should be acknowledged.

The federal transition also proved to be a challenge in terms of local government capacity to respond. There has been significant reduction of professional development and support structures for schools. This, along with the reduction of education training centres, will have curbed the ability of the sector to utilize its most valuable resource – the teachers. The data reviewed and consultations held confirmed that the most effective way to prevent learning loss is to facilitate continuing interaction between teachers and students. Despite constraints, government and teachers' professional organizations have been proactive in getting teachers trained and it is encouraging that EMIS confirms that the most-used alternative education modalities are teacher-supported.

The COVID-19 pandemic may well have served as a catalyst to galvanize inter-governmental coordination and collaboration, with the situation permitting the Nepal Education Cluster to facilitate this through the establishment of the provincial clusters. The fact that Nepal already had an active, strong national cluster mechanism because of the regularity of other disasters (such as earthquakes) will undoubtedly have helped.



04

Recommendations and conclusion



As schools open up, the traditional school-based attendance records will have to be revisited to be able to track children while they transition from formal to alternative education and back to normal.

4.1 Recommendations

Large-scale school reopening began in November 2020, when the federal government allowed local governments to decide, based on local assessments, whether this could be done safely. Many schools had been used as quarantine centres and were derelict. To bring children safely back into classrooms, assess their learning needs and pick up the curriculum again requires specific guidance, training, support and data collection activities.

Several recommendations emerged from the review and analysis. They are set out below to inform the government and education sector development partners on the next steps:

Tackle absenteeism

As schools open up, the traditional school-based attendance records will have to be revisited to be able to track children while they transition from formal to alternative education and back to normal. It is clear that many children will require targeted support to return to and remain in school after the reopening. Standard operating procedures and mechanisms should be in place to deal with absenteeism, and municipalities should ensure that the responsibilities of teachers, head teachers and school committees to approach parents and caregivers about bringing students to school are taken seriously. Schools should know when to escalate action to a referral system, which should function and investigate any

matter of absenteeism. As socio-economic difficulties and overcoming fear of infections may still be formidable obstacles, local governments must work closely with schools to track and manage enrolment and school career survival targets, particularly in primary schools.

Test students on competency and learning loss so teachers can put learning back on track

When children come back to school, their levels will be even more differentiated than before COVID-19. Their competency and learning should be assessed very simply, with priority given to basic literacy and numeracy. A standardized diagnostic test, such as the planned study by the MoEST to determine learning loss, should be rolled out nationally. The tests can vary depending on the location, as local usefulness is more important than national standardization, and multiple grades can be covered in a single test. Teachers can be taught to use it in an easy way, for example using an instructional video. There is ample evidence that tests can be administered on a mobile phone platform in 5–10 minutes, and that the cost is manageable. Based on the results, the schools can reorganize grading and the teacher can devise strategies for remediation and catching up for students. Municipalities can target their support to weaker schools and school committees can be informed of the status and progress of learning. This methodology is suitable for primary level, and less so for secondary.

Reopen schools and ensure a safe and healthy school environment for teachers and students

Schools must reopen as soon as it is safe – it would be highly disadvantageous for children to be out of school much longer, particularly those from vulnerable communities. Protocols for safe schools are available, although they may have to become more operational and context-specific. Infection prevention and control procedures should be in place as long as schools play a potential role in the pandemic. There may be challenges in procuring protective equipment and cleaning materials, WASH infrastructure, classroom space etc. In many locations, classroom refurbishment and/or construction will be needed, which will require an effective system of contracts and supplies with oversight from the municipality. The readiness status of schools should be tracked, and monitoring of received and used stock should be in place. Near real-time monitoring will be required to ensure the quick re-establishment of a satisfactory and situation-proof school environment.

Cross-cutting priorities

For COVID-19 recovery, there are specific needs for data collection, analysis and use to ensure that cross-cutting priorities – gender, WASH in schools, child protection, health and nutrition etc. – are being realized. The ongoing efforts to strengthen the recently established web-based EMIS provide a timely opportunity for this in terms of capturing the progress towards COVID-19 recovery. The monitoring needs for local government comprise real-time data on attendance, data on schools' compliance with COVID-19 safety protocols, data on infrastructure development (especially WASH facilities), on digital readiness, and regular data on learning. However the current EMIS system is only updated twice a year, and does not provide this information. Some data (such as on learning outcomes) is collected through different systems, other data is collected through household surveys. This information is stored in data systems that are not linked to the EMIS.

Integrating these various data systems to provide local governments with a comprehensive, up-to-date picture is therefore a vital prerequisite for dynamic decision-making. Municipalities, mandated to provide education, cannot respond quickly to emerging needs and challenges without access to regularly updated information. They need to analyse the status of the schools and recovery plans, and

they require constant feedback loops to ensure prompt responses to lagging implementation. Specialized units in the education system can assist local government to access and analyse data to provide situational snapshots to use in decision-making and planning. Data indicating lack of progress can be used to justify course correction and reprogramming of scarce resources.

Strengthen local governance capacity and management

Local governance capacity and management routines should be supported by data. At present, many local governments are unable to spend their capital budget fully. Provincial governments should engage if there is lack of spending in certain municipalities, particularly if they have a high proportion of vulnerable populations. Effective implementation depends on continuous monitoring of budget expenditure and actual progress. Meeting routines should be established with the right people present and clear agendas – individuals should be made accountable for follow-up and reporting. The potential strength of the mandated elected local bodies is to provide contextually relevant solutions, which should be leveraged to the maximum.

An immediate priority is to provide solid foundations for recovery activities in the longer-term plans formulated as part of the newly prepared education sector plan (the new SSDP 2021-2030).

More technical support is needed at palika level in the use of evidence for planning and monitoring, including monitoring implementation, much of which requires real-time data. Of particular relevance in Nepal is regular attendance checking, including for distance learning, to prevent students dropping out. Data on learning is vital to know whether distance learning strategies are effective and, in due course, to see whether remediation interventions are successful. Real-time data allows schools' compliance with safety protocols to be monitored. It also facilitates the tracking of school WASH infrastructure and can be used to detect schools that need more support, capacity development, supplies or staff training. Finally, regular data is needed to help strengthen the whole system in terms of quality education, skills and learning.

Local governments can shape response plans using national and regional guidance. Over time, the response should become more evidence-driven, starting with tailoring a simple, systematic monitoring and evaluating system that fits the present mandates of government and

job descriptions of officers. They can then plan for the next phases of the recovery, aiming for a more child-friendly education system, with an increased focus on learning outcomes, than before.

4.2 Priorities for COVID-19 response and recovery

This section describes in more detail how these recommendations could be delivered, based on a case study in Pakistan, where the delivery model was successfully applied.¹⁵⁹ These elements can be used as a general checklist against which actions to improve education delivery can be identified. In Nepal, the most important 'delivery unit' for education is now local government. The plan for the 2021 financial year still has a long list of activities to be implemented at local level with very detailed conditionalities.¹⁶⁰ In the future, it would be appropriate to reduce the conditionalities while maintaining education quality and applicable norms to

ensure transparent governance. This framework should enable municipalities themselves to plan and implement, maximizing the desired outcomes depending on the specific context.

Recent advice as input for the new phase of SSDP (2021–2030) provides a wide range of suggested priorities such as institutional,¹⁶¹ labour market compatibility, disability, inclusion and gender,¹⁶² macro-economic and public finance,¹⁶³ and social impact.¹⁶⁴ These studies provide the basis for the next phase of support to education, in which learning will receive an even higher priority, and a range of ambitions related to more inclusion of vulnerable groups, relevance for a changing labour market, and making government more responsive and adaptive. The potential for change driven by local government is obvious. However, it should be recognized that the COVID-19 crisis should enable the municipalities (and in a few cases provinces) to act as delivery units for education. Tables 3–6 set out the actions that could be considered for inclusion in both the immediate response and possibly in longer-term plans.



TABLE 3 | PRIORITIZATION AND RESOURCING

IMPORTANT ELEMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION DELIVERY	COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY ACTIONS	SUPPORT MECHANISMS
<p>Focus on a limited number of key priorities which are clearly understood across the delivery system.</p>	<p>Maximize re-enrolment and counter dropout effects due to socio-economic impacts such as household income loss and migration. Real time tracking of children's return to school and attendance by ERO and CEHRD.</p> <p>Ensure school safety including health, well-being and protection of students and teachers. Provide necessary infrastructure such as handwashing facilities, sanitation, and sufficient space in classrooms.</p> <p>Prioritize and sequence planned interventions to ensure focus on a limited number of manageable priorities for local governments to monitor and track progress, and establish mechanisms of regular stocktake meetings to review implementation and course-correction if needed.</p> <p>Support local governments to assess whether schools offer a safe learning environment (in terms of student-teacher ratio, spacing, WASH facilities etc), investments needed to have all schools meet these requirements and alternative arrangements for those children that will face extended school closure while schools are being made ready.</p> <p>Re-establish teaching and learning processes supported by quick assessments of learning losses and levels. Identify and introduce measures to accelerate learning. Strengthen the current assessment systems at school level.</p>	<p>Make provision for pre-primary and early years, specifically monitoring/tracking the return to school in recognition of the importance of early years children.</p> <p>Provide targeted support to children who could not access or participate in remote learning either because of lack of technology, lack of parental support, and/or inability to read printed materials.</p> <p>Make contingency plans for effective remote delivery of education in case of worsening pandemic or other disasters that could lead to school closures.</p> <p>Train teachers to assess children's competency levels and learning loss to match children with suitable grade in the curriculum.</p> <p>In the medium term, train the teachers to conduct continuous formative assessments in classrooms.</p>
<p>Ensure that there is a strong link between priorities and resources so that adequate budgets are available</p>	<p>Ensure local budgeting and investments enable children to return to school, stay in school and continue learning.</p> <p>Analyse the best spending options according to local conditions for COVID-19 recovery. Incorporate education improvement effectively into municipalities' annual plans and budgets based on data and evidence from schools (to mitigate political bias and/or favouritism).</p>	<p>Integrate status of COVID-19 recovery actions into EMIS. Data on infrastructure, students and teacher data can then be linked to budgets and spending to assess the cost-effectiveness and equity gains.</p> <p>Ensure dialogue between policymakers and line agencies at national level, provincial level and municipal decision-makers to match national priorities with local resources, conditions and specific needs.</p> <p>Reverse the trend of poor local budget execution by streamlining public financial management and implementation processes, and decreasing percentage of total budget going to education.</p>
<p>Develop a clear understanding of tangible outcomes</p>	<p>Define specific, tangible outcomes essential for COVID-19 recovery to measure performance trends.</p> <p>Establish a strong experience-action feedback loop within and between levels of government and civil society to enable actions and spending to be changed and directed to emerging needs.</p>	<p>Municipalities should develop a clear vision of the desired outcomes in education aligned with national policy objectives and SDG4 in the short-, medium- and long-term.</p> <p>Municipalities should perform outcome mapping to demonstrate to communities how the inputs will lead to outputs and outcomes.</p> <p>National and provincial government (e.g., through Provincial and Local Government Support Programme (PLGSP) should build capacity and develop a cadre on education planning and management.</p> <p>Support local governments to develop clear actions plans and activities to address learning loss and outcomes.</p>

TABLE 4 | DATA, INFORMATION AND ROUTINES

IMPORTANT ELEMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION DELIVERY	COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY ACTIONS	SUPPORT MECHANISMS
<p>Use data as the basis for establishing effective performance management routines</p>	<p>Collect data frequently (at least every month) during reopening and establishment of satisfactory conditions in schools.</p> <p>Mobilize sufficient staff to visit and monitor schools to track progress against the recovery indicators and the municipal annual work plan and budget and ensure effective reporting into municipalities.</p> <p>Establish mechanisms to assess student learning and track learning levels as a basis for understanding the performance of schools, teachers and students.</p> <p>Municipalities should ensure that regular sharing and monitoring meetings take place based on up-to-date analysed information, and that recommendations for actions are effectively conveyed to decision-makers and planners.</p> <p>Establish clear individual accountability to ensure follow-up, particularly on remedial action, to improve poorly performing schools.</p>	<p>Strengthen existing EMIS modules to ensure quick, simple data collection based on electronic surveys.</p> <p>Improve job descriptions and define personal performance goals for municipal education officers to provide strong support to schools during re-opening and beyond.</p> <p>Establish performance management of head teachers and teachers based on school improvement objectives and desired learning outcomes.</p> <p>Build capacity of school leadership, promote and intensify the role of school committees to ensure the engagement and understanding of parents and community.</p> <p>Share effective practice (e.g. agendas, data and evidence, tracking follow-up etc.) across municipalities.</p>
<p>Develop good quality data and metrics to measure what matters.</p>	<p>Municipalities should establish consistent school data collection based on existing record-keeping in schools plus any extra information required for the emergency response.</p> <p>Municipalities should develop indicators based on national priorities (e.g., learning measurement, compliance with safety standards etc.) based on simple templates.</p> <p>Specify additional data requirements to be incorporated in EMIS to monitor COVID-19 recovery actions, and effectively integrate them into the data collection and reporting process.</p> <p>Ensure EMIS can track both in-school and out-of-school children, and alert local planners and budget holders where children are not returning to school.</p>	<p>Make EMIS data available to local planners, planning cycles and processes; supplement and enrich this resource with additional data collected by local government at school level based on local needs and priorities.</p> <p>Assess municipalities' need for data from EMIS database, and ensure more user-friendly query options and dashboards on the EMIS website to track school performance.</p> <p>In the longer term, formative assessment methodologies should be strengthened, and data should be available in EMIS to assess progress of individual students.</p> <p>Offer more support to provinces and municipalities from specialized institutions to provide useful analytics and capacity building of local staff.</p> <p>Develop a phased, timed and costed plan to address internet connectivity of schools and local governments so that they can collect data electronically and deliver remote teaching.</p> <p>Undertake an assessment to establish IT capacity of school level and local government staff, and provide tailored training.</p>

TABLE 5 | ANALYSIS AND UNDERSTANDING OF DELIVERY ISSUES

IMPORTANT ELEMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION DELIVERY	COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY ACTIONS	SUPPORT MECHANISMS
Stakeholders are actively engaged in analysing delivery issues and owning outcomes	<p>Ensure that local education improvement planning (annual/multi-year) is context-specific and based on national objectives and standards.</p> <p>Highlight and prioritize specific COVID-19 response delivery issues within existing structures (e.g., monitoring committee, council meetings).</p> <p>Provinces and municipalities should develop a quick mechanism to instruct teachers to conduct rapid assessments of competence and learning following learning losses.</p>	<p>Delivery issues in education should be a fixed item on the agenda of Municipal Council meetings, and actively involve Ward Chairpersons in the delivery issues.</p> <p>Provinces need to initiate in-service Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in consultation with local government supporting higher education outcomes in the longer term.</p>
Clear understanding of delivery systems to identify the drivers of successful outcomes and the motivations and perceptions of actors throughout the system	<p>Continue communication on the conditions for re-opening schools.</p> <p>Provinces should use a straightforward template to review and consolidate the municipalities' plans and reports on re-opening schools.</p>	<p>The Education Act should incorporate analysis of how government mandates and modalities should be the drivers of successful education outcomes.</p> <p>Provinces should provide best practice in the incorporation of education plans at municipal level, and support mainstreaming with their multi-year perspective plans and expenditure frameworks.</p> <p>Define clearly the role of provinces in coordination, technical support, teacher education, continuous professional development (CPD) and deployment.</p>
Understand and involve front-line workers in analysing problems and developing solutions	<p>Municipalities should obtain and consolidate information on readiness and school reopening status from schools and municipal education officers.</p>	<p>Systematically involve head teachers, teachers and teaching unions in dialogue on priorities, particularly on teachers' working conditions and training needs.</p> <p>Improve school management and design, and implement CPD and support to head teachers.</p> <p>Teachers, head teachers, and municipal education officers should be supported to become more effective professionals.</p> <p>Strengthen teacher training to include resilience to shocks of learning and children's well-being. This should include remote teaching methods in case new crises require such modality.</p>
Develop an effective support and challenge function at national and local levels with strong emphasis on capacity building, especially on sub-national strategic planning.	<p>Provinces should provide contextualized guidance and training to municipalities. Integrate COVID-19 education response into municipalities' annual plans and budgets.</p> <p>Ensure more rapid transfer of funds from central government through district treasuries.</p> <p>Ensure that schools are supported and challenged by communities through effective school committees.</p>	<p>Further streamline federal fund disbursement for municipalities through district treasuries to ensure it arrives reliably and on time. This should deal with current issues such as incomplete utilization of funds, incomplete reporting, and unclear accountability. Provinces can be enabled and mandated to support and control this.</p> <p>Plan the next National Assessment of Student Achievement to include measuring the success of the COVID-19 recovery.</p>

TABLE 6 | COMMUNICATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

IMPORTANT ELEMENTS	COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY ACTIONS	SUPPORT MECHANISMS
<p>Develop an effective communications strategy to assist in rapidly engendering change and reform to ‘turn around’ a perceived decline or deficit in standards of service delivery</p>	<p>Guidelines of norms and standards should be on time and realistic.</p> <p>Communication should be established with communities to bring out-of-school children to schools e.g., through child protection mechanisms and school committees.</p>	<p>Provide a framework and practice of cross-municipality learning, analysing successes and failures related to the COVID-19 recovery and reopening of schools.</p> <p>MoEST should use cross-sector local analyses of how the COVID-19 crisis has increased poverty and other socio-economic problems of vulnerable communities in planning and support to local government.</p>
<p>Ensure accountability for performance throughout the delivery system.</p>	<p>Ensure that mainstream systems integrate measures of COVID-19 recovery against objectives, and ensure targets are connected with individuals throughout. This will involve teachers, head teachers, municipal personnel (such as education officers, chief administrative officers, and provincial officers) and coordination/policy development functions in central institutions.</p>	<p>Municipalities should organize participatory planning meetings (including stakeholder consultations and feedback mechanisms) and, based on performance data comparable with other local government and provincial averages, should incorporate priorities at school and ward levels on COVID-19 response and recovery into their seven-step annual planning and budgeting process.</p> <p>Ensure parent engagement through school committees, and ensure participation of vulnerable communities in planning the COVID-19-response, the recovery of schools and utilizing other available support.</p>

4.3 Funding COVID-19 recovery

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the MoEST estimates the cost of direct interventions to support COVID-19 recovery to be around \$60 million.¹⁶⁵ Financing is being sought – the government applied for a grant from the GPE of around \$11 million, which would cover some interventions but would not be sufficient to finance the full extent of the need.¹⁶⁶

During the 2019/20 fiscal year, almost 12 per cent of the national budget was allocated to education, with actual expenditure on the education sector amounting to 15.5 per cent¹⁶⁷ of total expenditure by the end of the fiscal year. A 12 per cent real time increase of the federal budget has thus been established, when the resources allocated to education from equalization grants and the resources of provincial and local governments are taken into account. Although this reverses the decreasing trend seen over the past few years, the SSDP remains underfunded and below the national and international targets.

The medium- and long-term response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector, as well as Nepal’s constitutional commitments (the transition to a federal structure) and the aim to increase access to quality education will require significant increases in the education budget. The education sector appears to have the ability to absorb additional resources even in the challenging context of federal transition.

4.4 Conclusion

When the COVID-19 crisis began and the schools were ordered to close, the Nepal education sector was in a state of transition, following the 2015 constitutional changes, which devolved service delivery and development to local government. Municipalities with elected councils became responsible for school management, provision, paying salaries etc. Provincial governments now cover teacher training and development, and have an obvious role in technical support and coordination of the municipalities. Central government’s role to develop policy and technical guidance remains the same. However, the earlier role of the MoEST – direct delivery through the districts – is now limited to channelling earmarked funds (such as conditional grants), providing guidance and standards for reporting, compiling and quality-controlling data, and coordinating teacher recruitment and deployment.

The 'federalization' process presents a challenge in coordination between the three levels of government, and the capacity of local government should be upgraded to match the requirements of their large mandate. In the interim, there is a risk of poor service delivery, particularly in remote municipalities with a higher proportion of vulnerable population – some of this has manifested itself during the COVID-19 crisis. While local governments were certainly active in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, they were also overwhelmed, understaffed and could not effectively utilize the available funds (some funds were used for other purposes than education).

As in other low-income countries, Nepal has made spectacular gains in access and equity in the last two decades, with high levels of primary school enrolment, rising literacy levels, increased numbers of pupils continuing to secondary education. Survival rates are improving but many children are still dropping out. Nepal is also similar to many other countries in the region in that the quality of education and learning is lagging

behind global indicators, and learning needs to improve significantly to prepare Nepal's children for the demands of the labour market.

The COVID-19 crisis dealt a severe blow to the fragile progress that had been made on a new delivery system. When schools had to close, local governments were guided to some extent by central government, which provided disaster relief funds and developed many initiatives to ensure children could continue learning. Distribution of textbooks and home learning materials happened on quite a large scale, although not everywhere. Teachers have been enabled to visit homes, and in some cases teach in smaller groups. Other remote teaching modalities using radio and internet were developed and rolled out, but success was limited due to limitations in access and other constraints in implementation. There is now a need to fast-track education service delivery that is tailored to an effective COVID-19 response and accelerates progress towards longer-term goals.



Annex: List of consultations

GROUP	DATE	LOCATION AND LANGUAGE
Yadab Prasad Acharya, Section Officer from the Development Assistance Coordination Section of the MoEST	1 October 2020	Zoom. English

Questions

- Having been intensively involved in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic at the federal level, what do you perceive to be the main short/medium and long-term impact of this on the education sector in Nepal?
- What role do you see the federal government playing to address these challenges?
- Can you share the main opportunities and challenges you have encountered in the response to the pandemic in the education sector relating to the ongoing federal transition?
- Nepal experiences regular local and national disasters, in those cases cluster takes over and deals with the response to education, but in the case of COVID-19, it is different because it is not a one-time event and is much broader. Normally, it goes from humanitarian response to cluster and then goes back to sector-wide approach. Now cluster is still supporting CHR, but Minister and focal point and development partners doing regular sector planning, etc. What are the federal government's perceptions of how the connection between these two processes is working?

GROUP	DATE	LOCATION AND LANGUAGE
Local government consultations	6 October 2020	Zoom. Mainly Nepali. UNICEF Nepal provided summarized responses during the call

Questions

1. Responses to COVID-19

- Thinking about your local education response, what do you think has gone well?
- Thinking about your local education response, what has been the greatest challenge? How have you addressed this challenge?
- What have been some of the greatest lessons that you could apply to future responses to make your local government more resilient?
- Has funding been redirected to education? If so, how has the budget been redirected?
- How do you give schools and schools management the confidence to re-open?

2. Reaching the most marginalized

- How have you ensured the most vulnerable and most marginalized children continue learning?

3. Planning and coordination

- What level of coordination took place at provincial and federal level?
- Can you provide an overview of funding for education i.e. Were you given additional funds from the federal/provincial government? If so, how quickly did the local government have access to those funds? How did you get access to those funds?

Participants

- Lok Narayan Yadav, Mayor, Parsagadi Municipality
- Padam Baduwa, Mayor, Badimalika Municipality
- Lalit Bikram Singh, Under-Secretary, Birendranagar Municipality
- Pawan Kushwaha, Education Officer, Chakraghatta Rural Municipality
- Pradeep Chaurasiya, Education Officer, Parsagadi Municipality
- Lokraj Panthi, Under-Secretary and Head of the Education Unit, Shivaraj Municipality
- Rangamal Bishwakarma, Education Officer, Badimalika Municipality

ECO-ZONE	RURAL/URBAN MUNICIPALITY	PROVINCE	DISTRICT	LOCAL GOVERNMENT
Terai	Rural	Province 2	Sarlahi	Chakraghatta Rural Municipality
Terai	Urban	Province 2	Parsa	Parsagadi Municipality
Terai	Urban	Province 5	Kapilbastu	Shivaraj Municipality
Hill	Urban	Karnali	Surkhet	Birendranagar Municipality
Mountain	Urban	Sudurpaschim	Bajura	Badimalika Municipality

GROUP	DATE	LOCATION AND LANGUAGE
Monthly Local Education Development Partners Group (LEDPG) meeting	30 September 2020	Zoom. English

Questions

- How has your agency supported this response in regard to continuity of learning?
- Is it possible to re-purpose funds? Even for large programme areas that were being supported listed in the SSDPs?
- How is the federal transition affecting the COVID-19 response and how are they able to adapt?
- Now that Palikas can decide on schools, do you foresee an equity issue? Do you discuss this with government and with this group?

Participants

- Juan Jose Casanova Arasa (European delegation to Nepal)
- Kati Bose, Indra Gurung (Embassy of Finland)
- Smita Gyawali, Rajan Acharya (ADB)
- Yukiko Okugawa (JICA)
- Kamla Bisht, Ingrid Buli (Royal Norwegian embassy to Nepal)
- Mark Waltham, Purushottam Acharya, Jimi Oostrum (UNICEF)
- Jayakrishna Upadhyay, Uddhav Bhandari (USAID)
- Gopini Pandey (WFP)
- Abhiram Roy (UNFPA)
- Maya Sherpa, Bipana Sharma (World Bank)
- Aagat Awasthi, Prativa Shrestha (UNESCO)
- Deependra Thapa, Fawad Shams, Manju Lama (consultants for SSDP technical assistance team)
- Frances Hitchens (consultants for education sector analysis)

GROUP	DATE	LOCATION AND LANGUAGE
CSOs and INGOs	2 October 2020	Zoom. Nepali and English

Questions

- What has been the biggest challenge to ensure children continue to learn?
- How were you able to engage at the federal, provincial, and local level?
- Share your experience with the federal government.
- How do CSOs feel that they could support with response?
- What needs to be the priority from government regarding education?
- We know that there is a significant number of Nepali children who have not been learning at all, are there any organizations within AIN who focus on children with zero access and how do you identify them?

Participants

- Dr Laxmi Paudyal, Save the Children, AIN education working group lead
- Ananda Paudel, VSO Nepal, AIN education working group alternate lead
- Parash Malla, Plan International, AIN
- Deepak Dulal, Good Neighbors International
- Seema Acharya, World Education International
- Netra Dahal, Room to Read
- Subekshya Karki, Humanity and Inclusion
- Nabin Lamichhane, Mercy Corps
- Keshav Bhatta, World Vision
- Dilli Ram Subedi, President, NCE Nepal
- Ram Gaire, Secretary, NCE Nepal
- Lab Raj Oli, Treasurer, NCE Nepal

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Subject: English

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Nepal Case Study

Situation Analysis on the Effects
of and Responses to COVID-19
on the Education Sector in Asia

This report reviews the impacts of and responses to COVID-19 on education in Nepal, provides reflections on lessons learned so far in Nepal's COVID-19 response, and analyzes capacity gaps for recovery. It explores successful elements of the Government response, issues and challenges faced, and strategies adopted to continue students' learning during school closure. It also looks to the future, in building back better and increasing the resilience of the education system to future shocks.

Stay in Touch

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