

Indirect Scarring of Health and Educational Outcomes by COVID-19

Health

Sri Lanka has made commendable progress in curbing the COVID-19 pandemic through the rapid and swift implementation of mobility restrictions and especially its strong nationwide vaccination drive. However, since long, Sri Lanka has been struggling with the burden of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases, cancers, and cardiovascular diseases, which remain a leading cause of mortality and morbidity issues in the population. In 2019, before the pandemic, 82.5% of the deaths in Sri Lanka were caused by NCDs. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the vulnerability of those who suffer from NCDs has increased, not only because they are more prone to develop complications from COVID-19 but also because their regular medical care has been disrupted and because of sedentary lifestyles due to mobility restrictions. In the wake of COVID-19, certain measures had been undertaken to ensure continuity of care of such patients through telemedicine and by supplying regular medicines to door-step via postal services, though the effectiveness of such care is questionable. Further, due to overcrowding of hospitals with the surge of COVID-19 cases, less priority is being given for elective surgeries and, clinical procedures, and seemingly mild ailments, especially with patients opting not to visit hospitals. Therefore, continued commitment to the containment and subsequent surveillance of the COVID-19 pandemic is essential not only in terms of its direct impact but also due to its indirect impact on those suffering from NCDs. Meanwhile, suicide rates in Sri Lanka were high even before the pandemic, with mental health issues such as depression, despite being common, most often being neglected. The prolonged impact of mobility restrictions and social isolation, sudden loss of family members, and loss of livelihoods due to the economic downturn could create a long-lasting impact on the mental health of those affected by the pandemic. Mental health issues are also likely among frontline workers who have been working under immense pressure for a prolonged period under difficult working conditions, while facing traumatic experiences on a daily basis. Therefore, measures should be taken to provide mental healthcare support to pandemic-affected families and frontline workers, to ensure their mental health wellbeing during the pandemic period as well as during the post-pandemic period.

Education

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed many inadequacies and inequalities in the country's education system. Despite the rapid transition of educational activities to online platforms, it is essential to be wary of the efficacy and equity of online education outcomes as these can lead to inequalities related to opportunities and social mobility. In turn, these outcomes can lead to perpetuating inequities that will negatively affect economic growth and socioeconomic wellbeing in the long term. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the rapid adoption of blended learning approaches by schools and other educational institutions has been remarkable and has been pivotal to the continuity of educational activities over the last year and a half. However, well before the pandemic, there had been significant disparities in education infrastructure with much of it being concentrated in urban centres and rural areas lagging even in basic infrastructure facilities, including sufficient teachers, let alone other technological infrastructure. This dearth of infrastructure required to achieve sufficient educational outcomes is not only at the school level but also prevalent at the household level as reflected in the computer literacy rate of just 32.3% in 2020 and computer ownership being limited to just 22.2% of households in 2020. It is even more disconcerting that only 3.8% of households in the estate sector owned a desktop or a laptop as against 37.1% in the urban sector, and that computer literacy and digital literacy levels in the estate sector were almost only one third that of the urban sector. The rural sector is also lagging behind its urban counterpart, although better than the estate sector. Notable inequalities are also observed across regions. Accordingly, with the increased reliance on technology, especially for educational purposes, these statistics highlight that significant disparities in education outcomes are highly likely in the period ahead due to this 'digital divide', which in turn will have detrimental effects on long term earning potential and living standards of those affected. Further, in the midst of the strike of schoolteachers over the last three months, online tuition classes and fee levying private schools have continued their education activities. Amid this continued provisioning of education services by the private sector, the disruptions observed in public provisioning of education services can pave way for disparities in educational outcomes of these two groups of students. However, some notable initiatives in the education sector during recent months have been the Ministry of Education's initiatives to broadcast educational programmes on television channels and also the '*Gamata Sanniwedanaya*' programme launched by the TRCSL and telecom service providers to address issues of internet coverage and 'dark spots'. These programmes are expected to create some qualitative improvements in education outcomes. However, the sector is still in dire need of a holistic and multi-pronged approach to the inclusive delivery of education services amid these unique circumstances. Certain essential policies include increased awareness and training for teachers on how to facilitate and support students' learning process rather than simply delivering content. This will require improvements to syllabi and pedagogy, both of which needed improvements even before the COVID-19 pandemic. At this point, existing 'open' content can be curated and aligned to the national curriculum rather than trying to develop new content. Small yet timely efforts by education policymakers and teaching staff are of utmost importance to minimise any 'learning poverty' arising from the pandemic, especially among young children and students with special needs, both of whom tend to derive higher benefits from face-to-face pedagogy.