



Transcript of IMF podcast:

Yamini Aiyar on the Education Pandemic

Yamini Aiyar:

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Bruce Edwards:

The pandemic sparked a huge upheaval in education around the world. But it's kids in low-income countries like India and in Africa that were left with very few alternatives to in-person learning. In this episode, how the economic impact of school closures will be felt long after this pandemic is over.

Yamini Aiyar:

10 years from now, the real costs of COVID are going to be very, very visible in the fact that you have huge productivity losses. And their contribution to the economy is going to be significantly lower than what their potential contribution to the economy could be.

Yamini Aiyar:

I'm Yamini Aiyar, and I'm the President and Chief Executive of the Center for Policy Research, which is a multidisciplinary think tank based out of New Delhi in India.

Bruce Edwards:

Journalist Rhoda Metcalfe connected with Yamini Aiyar, virtually, to talk about her recent article titled The Education Pandemic, published in the March issue of Finance and Development.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

You know, I think just about any person with children in virtually any country in the world has been worried about the effect the pandemic has had on their children's education. But looking at especially the developing world, I mean, how much education have children actually lost because of COVID?

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Yamini Aiyar:

Well, let's take the case of India, which is the country I live in and the one that I know best. In many parts of the world and in elite homes in India, like my own, primary schools were the first to close. So about when the Western world was beginning to lockdown, before the government of India announced the national lockdown, primary schools started closing all across the country. Now almost seamlessly, schools began to transition into the online schooling system. So technology enabled a big shift. And my children in my elite home in New Delhi suddenly made their way into a new kind of classroom. It wasn't a physical classroom. It was a Zoom room with tiny little boxes where they wave to their friends and talk to their teachers.

Yamini Aiyar:

But mine are the privileged few. For the bulk of India, access to a Zoom room is far harder than access to a physical classroom. A survey that was conducted in September, 2021 of over 1400 school children from disadvantaged homes across 15 states in India found that only about 8% of children in rural areas and 24% children in urban areas had access to regular online education. And India isn't alone. There's data from Africa, from the Asia Pacific, that tells us that access to a seamless internet that allows for online learning isn't as widespread as many of us would imagine sitting on Zoom conversations and recording podcasts as you and I are.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

So in other words, the pandemic has made very clear this enormous digital divide in countries.

Yamini Aiyar:

Oh, absolutely. Digital inequality is the word I would use. It's not just a digital divide, because the divide also is very much linked to economic status. And so better off households obviously have access to internet, and poorer households are the ones that suffer the most.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Right, right. So do we have any idea how many kids actually continued to get an education during the pandemic?

Yamini Aiyar:

It's hard to put a number on it. All governments around the world, including ours in India, experimented in different ways and forms to try and find ways of getting some kind of learning inputs to students through this period. In India, WhatsApp is a very, very widely used tool. So many governments and schools were sending messages to parents with worksheets, with some inputs on what needed to be done via WhatsApp. And presumably some parents did some things with children. There were

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campaigns in some parts of India where school teachers in times when COVID the disease was ebbing, who ran campaigns basically going to student homes and trying to talk to children one on one, giving them some kind of learning input, similar things. TV was used a lot in Africa. But these are very, very limited. They don't substitute for a classroom. And certainly the scale of it was not equivalent to what it meant for children to come to school.

Yamini Aiyar:

But there's another issue here. In countries like India where the public schooling system, for a whole host of reasons, has been atrophying over some time. Many relatively better off, so not the poorest of the poor but one level above, were beginning to choose to send their children to low cost private schools. When the lockdown happened and low cost private schools shut, it essentially meant that they lost access to fees, money, et cetera. And there was also a large movement of families from urban towns where people come to work back into rural areas.

Yamini Aiyar:

So therefore one indicator we do have is that enrollment levels in government schools have increased quite a lot in India. Which is an indicator that as private schools began to close down, as family began to lose income, they put children into government schools. And that too has caused quite a big break in students learning. So one of the issues is that many private schools tend to teach in "English medium." Whereas the government schools are local languages. They teach in the mother tongue at the primary level. So there's a language break too for children. And that of course is going to affect their ability to grasp foundational skills, which are so essential at primary school level.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Right. Of course. The other thing that I noticed, and you mentioned in your article, is that schools in many developing countries have actually been closed a lot longer, haven't they, than in North America or Europe?

Yamini Aiyar:

Oh, absolutely. India, I think, hit the world record. So the UNESCO has been tracking this. Uganda had the longest between partial and full closure of about 82 weeks, India across 83 weeks.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

So are the kids in school now in India?

Yamini Aiyar:

No, they were going in twice a week and they will only go full time every day on the 4th of April when the new academic year starts. So essentially a large proportion of children in India have not been inside schools with any degree of regularity for two full academic years. Now that's a very long time.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Why so long? I mean, why have the governments in Africa, in India, and places in Asia and Latin America, why have they been so slow to get schools back up and running? I mean, is it out of an abundance of caution or was it something else?

Yamini Aiyar:

There were very clear lobbies for reopening of all kinds of economic activities, because of course people were hurting very, very badly from the lockdown. But there wasn't a strong constituency for schools. And I think one of the reasons for this is that elite voices tend to be heard much more than the voices of the masses. So the government of Delhi, for example, did a survey of parents in July of 2021 just after the very, very frightening second wave that Delhi, in particular, had to go through.

Yamini Aiyar:

We had a serious oxygen crisis and there were very scary images of patients gasping for breath and losing their lives. It was a difficult phase. And two months later, despite the difficulties as the economy started opening up, most low income families, parents, were very vocal in the survey saying that they would like for schools to reopen. Elites were not. They were still scarred by what they had experienced. And because they had access to online school, the assumption that online can substitute and therefore we should continue with the abundance of caution protocol to the bitter end, really did overwhelm how the debate unfolded. And I'm glad that finally sense has prevailed. And at least we've moved on to say, especially after Omicron, it's time for us to reopen.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

So you make the point in your article that for individual children and their families, of course losing this two years of education is very costly to their future. Do we have any sense as to lost potential earnings around this?

Yamini Aiyar:

So there's a couple of estimates. The EDB tells us that there has been quite a lot of learning loss, particularly in South Asia where schools have been closed for a longer period. They estimate losses to future productivity and lifetime earnings that could be as high as 1.25 trillion for developing Asia, equivalent to about 5.4% of the region's 2020 GDP. Another measure, my friend and colleague at CPR

who teaches at Georgetown, Jishnu Das, had studied the impact of school closures in Pakistan during the 2005 earthquake. And schools were closed, if I'm not wrong, for about eight weeks.

Yamini Aiyar:

And they traced this over a period of time and found that even eight weeks school closure without remedial input could amount to nearly 15 percentage points of loss of productivity of income over the adult life of these children. So think about eight weeks and then cut to 83 weeks and we really have a very serious problem in front of us. It's impact on countries GDP is inevitably going to be high. I think 10 years from now, the real costs of COVID are going to be very, very visible in the fact that you have huge productivity losses and their contribution to the economy is going to be significantly lower than what their potential contribution to the economy could be.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Right. Do you think government leaders are aware of what's been lost? I mean, is the government of India, for example, looking for ways to get the train back on the tracks in terms of education to make up this gap somehow?

Yamini Aiyar:

I wish I could say with complete confidence that the answer is yes, they are. But I'm not sure that they are. If you just look at the fact that it took nearly 83 weeks before schools were open, then we really are in a very, very difficult place. Most countries like India now are looking to the economy, are now on the path towards some amount of fiscal discipline. And in fact, with the global conditions being what they are in the context of the Russia, Ukraine crisis and inflation, this is going to be a very critical issue as governments look to manage their public finances. And India has not therefore done very much to expand education budgets. And I think we are mistaking the short term for the long term, and that's going to be a very critical problem going forward. Because if we don't invest now, the losses will not be made up and the costs are going to be felt by future generations.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

So your organization, The Center for Policy Research, you're a think tank in India and you've been following education issues for a long time, right? What do you think realistically can be done to make up some of this educational gap? I mean, especially in countries that don't have a ton of money.

Yamini Aiyar:

Well, I think we need to be very innovative. Children are not coming back to business as usual. So don't pick up where you left off. And in fact, I think at this point, the curriculum as we had imagined it in a world where children were going to school on a regular basis, has been rendered somewhat irrelevant

for the moment. What we need to do is urgently push remedial to get children back to the level of where they were expected to be in terms of curriculum level expectations. Summer holidays are upon us in India now. And in many countries it'll come over the next couple of months. This is the time to run remedial camps. I would just say, put the syllabus aside, put the curriculum aside. Spend four months intensive remedial camps for children, get out of the age grade framework. So we usually, so a child is put into a class in accordance with the age.

Yamini Aiyar:

Now we need to organize children by virtue of what they know. So we need to invest in assessments and we then need to invest in remedial training so that children are ready to sit back in the classroom. And let's also not forget that children have had very constrained lives for the last two years. Many children have been through very deep psychological challenges over these last two years. Let them get used to being in school again, and just get them confident about being in a classroom.

Yamini Aiyar:

That confidence comes from being in a position where you can grasp what the teacher is teaching. Teaching at the right level is one of the experiments that they have been running in India and Africa. And it tells you that in short periods of time, when children are placed according to their level and taught in a way that is joyful, that is exciting, that gets them to catch up, they catch up and they catch up very quickly. So all we need to do is to say the next four months are for catch up and for fun and let students and children do their thing away from the tyrannys of the syllabus and the examinations. And then we can get back to where we need it to be.

Rhoda Metcalfe:

Well on that very bright and cheery note, Yamini Aiyar, thank you for shining a light on this very important issue and giving us a better understanding of it.

Yamini Aiyar:

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Bruce Edwards:

That was Rhoda Metcalfe speaking with Yamini Aiyar, President and Chief Executive of The Center for Policy Research in New Delhi. Look for her article, The Education Pandemic, in Finance and Development. Check it out at imf.org/fnd or download the Finance and Development app. And you can find hundreds of IMF podcasts with interesting people like Yamini on Apple podcasts or wherever you listen. And don't forget to leave us a review, it helps others discover IMF podcasts. You can also follow us on Twitter @IMF_podcast. I'm Bruce Edwards.

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Rhoda Metcalfe:

And I'm Rhoda Metcalfe. Thanks for listening.