Analysis of Impact of
COVID-19
on Marginalized Youths of Nepal

NCE NEPAL

National Campaign For Education Nepal (NCE Nepal)

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PREFACE

National Campaign for Education Nepal (NCE Nepal) is a national level network working towards ensuring the right to education and lifelong learning of children and adults in Nepal through advocacy, lobby and campaign activities. Established in 2003 as a Nepal Chapter of Global Campaign for Education (GCE), NCE Nepal also holds the status of UN ECOSOC. Along with capacity enhancement of civil society organizations, advocacy through research and evidence is one of the priority works of NCE Nepal. NCE Nepal has conducted numerous research works to explore the situation of education and learning continuity of children and youths during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal. COVID-19 has mainly impacted the learning of the youths from marginalized and disabled community with their limited access to the resources which has also affected their lifestyle as a whole.

This research has been able to present the situation of policy implementation regarding learning continuation during the pandemic as well as the stark reality of marginalized youths across the country in their own narrative; portraying the picture of added discrimination faced by these youths in the times of crisis. It has also captured the perception of marginalized youths towards learning during the pandemic. The research serves as a guiding document for government and agencies working in the sector of youths mainly for designing the programs and policy formation to support the learning for the marginalized youths in Nepal.

I highly appreciate the contribution and effort of researcher and reviewer for their contribution in this work. I also express my gratitude towards partner organizations Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) and Education Out Loud (EOL) project by Global Partnership for Education for their support in carrying out the research work. I am also grateful to NCE Nepal's advisors, board Members, and all the member organizations for their valuable suggestions and guidance in the research and analysis works initiated by NCE Nepal. I would like to thank the secretariat team of NCE Nepal for the coordination in this research work.

Regards,
Dilli Ram Subedi
President

ABSTRACT

The entire education system has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and one of the major challenges is the widening digital divide which has led to a hurdle to access in education and learning opportunities especially for the marginalized and disabled youths. Marginalized and disabled people in Nepal have been facing multiple exclusion and socio-economic discrimination, which are mainly structured and the nature of discrimination is changing with time. Furthermore, there is a disproportionate impact of COVID-19 pandemic on this particular group, mainly those from the poor and working-class communities; affecting their lifestyle, access to education and job opportunities as a whole. The youths of these communities primarily face the burden of this impact curbing their opportunities of growth and right to education.

This study sought to explore and identify the challenges and learning needs of marginalized youths and youths with disabilities due to COVID-19, its impact upon their livelihood, health and income generation and other forms of inequalities they are experiencing in their daily lives using intensive literature review and in-depth interview with youths from marginalized communities including youths with disability. It also analyzed the gaps in policies prepared by the government to facilitate the learning needs during the pandemic and suggested ways to address the challenges identified from the study.

Even though government had prepared thorough guidelines for ensuring facilitation of learning for students, implementation was seen to be the main challenge. The experiences shared by the youths clearly indicate that large number of schools and local governments seem to be lacking in following the guidelines of keeping records of students' access to resources for learning, planning learning through alternative channels as well as ensuring that students are engaged in learning. It was found that many schools and colleges in remote districts and in the Terai had not facilitated learning in any way since quite some time. Lack of ICT materials and digital devices, poverty, lack of access to internet, lack of appropriate learning materials and resources for youths with disability, challenges related to teachers and schools were the major challenges identified in the study that acted as barrier for access to learning for youths. Students expressed a sense of helplessness, fear of being dropout, discrimination and inequity in education and pressure to give up their dreams and aspirations due to the present educational context as a result of the pandemic. The study portrays the grim picture of the present context of Nepalese education system which seems to have been severely disrupted by the pandemic. This scenario has shown that we lack in terms of resources, knowledge and skills for making classes available online and utter lack of coordination among responsible authorities in delivering the programs effectively.

Contents

List of Abbreviations

CDC	Curriculum Development Center
CEHRD	Center for Education and Human Resource Development
CPRD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
MoYS	Ministry of Youth and Sports
NCED	National Center Educational Development
NEB	National Examination Board
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEE	Secondary Education Examination
SMCs	School Management Committees
UGC	University Grants Commission
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNPFN	United Nations Peace Fund for Nepal

Section I: Introduction and Problem

The National Youth Policy, 2072 (2015) has defined 'youths' as citizens within the age bracket of 16 to 40 years old but has also recognized that the conditions and needs of the youths belonging to different age groups are different, and the targeted programs need to be conducted by dividing the youths into two age groups (16-24 years and 25-40 years). They are considered as the change agents of political, economic and social transformation. Majority of the composition of the working population comprises of youth and they can be called as the drivers of national economy as well. It is worthwhile noting that the contribution of Nepali youths in political and social transformation of the country has been significant as they have been actively participating in the discourse regarding the change they want to see and live out and have to some extent been able to bring out awareness regarding the need of such changes for the well-being of the nation. The focus of the National Youth Policy, 2072 (2015) is geared towards guaranteeing the basic rights of the youth, ensuring meaningful participation in the national development, encouraging competence, aspiration and leadership among youths.

The Nepali Youth in Figures, 2015 published by Ministry of Youth and Sports (MoYS) states that about 40.34% of the population in Nepal were youth aged 16 to 40 years. The youth population comprised of 54.5% of female population and 45.8% of male population. The literacy rate of 16-25 years' age group was 80% whereas it was 61.3% for 26-40 years' age group. Nearly 14% of the youths were abroad for employment and education (ibid). The Report also revealed that 50% of the total male population and 42% of the female population aged 16-25 years were economically active whereas 94% male and 66% female population aged 26-40 years were economically active. In terms of literacy status, even though 82% of the youths between age 16-24 years were literate, it is not uniform across gender, region, caste and ethnicity.

Table 1: Ecological Region and Literacy of Youths

Ecological Belt	Literate Youth (%)		
	Male	**Female**	**Total**
Mountain	81%	52%	65%
Hills	90%	73%	81%
Terai	75%	54%	64%
Total	**82%**	**63%**	**71%**

(Source: Nepal Youth in Figure, 2015)

This is even grim in terms of youths who are marginalized or with disability. It shows that there are disparities which are prevailing within the youth population across gender, region, caste, ethnicity and physical condition. Recognizing this disparity, the Youth Vision 2025 (MoYS) has formulated a ten-year strategic plan to 'materialize the rights, aspirations and needs of the youth'. The vision has emphasized national spirit, unity, equity, justice, cordiality and inclusiveness as the main foundations for realizing the vision. In fact, the main strategy of the Youth Vision 2025 is to eliminate gender, socio-cultural, ethnic, economic and geographical discrimination, disparity and inequality among youths from marginalized and deprived segments of society and develop competent, competitive and vocational youth resources.

COVID-19 has further widened this disparity among youths as they have been impacted systematically, deeply and disproportionately (ILO, 2020), particularly young women, younger youth and youth from lower-income countries such as Nepal. The data revealed by the study (ILO, 2020) has reported that of the young people who were either studying or combining study and work before the onset of the pandemic, three-quarters (73%) had experienced school closures, and not all were able to transition into online and distance learning. It has been reported that COVID-19 has left one in eight young people (13%) without any access to courses, teaching or training, which is acute crisis specially for those from lower-income countries like Nepal.

Young students from rural and remote areas, with limited access to technology and specially from marginalized communities and those with physical disability are disproportionately affected and are experiencing social inequalities in and through the alternative methods of education (Devkota, 2021). Digital divide is a burning issue which is going to have long lasting effects upon those vulnerable and marginalized youths who are likely to be deprived of opportunities in the future. This deepening divide and its implications can lead to further marginalization, exposure to vulnerability and many social and economic consequences.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2020) states that more than 500,000 youths enter the job market every year and with the rate of unemployment at 11.4% and limited alternative sources of income, it is almost certain that the COVID-19 crisis has rendered many youths especially marginalized and those with disabilities almost helpless and added to their suffering in multiple ways. COVID-19 has stood as a test globally and nationally assessing the potentiality and the readiness of the governments as well as associated organizations and institutions in achieving the globally committed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its principle of 'Leaving No One Behind'. SDG-4 focusing on 'ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education' and SDG-10 which advocates for 'Reduced Inequalities within and among countries' prove their importance and relevance even more during this pandemic when it is affecting lives disproportionately.

Compulsory Education is the constitutional right provided to every citizen. However, with lack of access to education and equitable participation in learning activities, it will have a serious impact on youths and especially those from marginalized communities and with disabilities, who are aspiring for a better tomorrow. In such case, it is important to study their experiences, perceptions, challenges which are so diverse in order to understand and have an informed view on how their learning needs and associated problems can be addressed. In this regard, this study will undertake to explore and identify the challenges and learning needs of marginalized youths and youths with disabilities due to COVID 19, its impact upon their livelihood and income generation and forms of inequalities they are experiencing in their daily lives. This study will also seek to analyze the gaps in policies prepared by the government to facilitate the learning needs during the pandemic and how these can be addressed as well based on the challenges identified from the study.

Section II: Research Objectives

The research objectives and questions for this study are as follows:

Objective 1: To review and analyze relevant literatures related to COVID-19 response plan, policies and practices of government to address and ensure the learning continuity of disabled and marginalized youths.

Objective 2: To identify the challenges faced by marginalized and disabled youths in terms of learning access and continuity, livelihood and income generation during the pandemic.

Objective 3: To provide recommendations based on the findings and analysis of the study.

Research Question:

1. What are the measures prepared and implemented by the government in order to ensure the learning needs of the disabled and marginalized youth in Nepal?

2. What are the challenges faced by marginalized and disabled youth in terms of learning access and continuity?

3. How has the pandemic affected the livelihood of marginalized and disabled youths?

4. What is the perception of marginalized and disabled youths towards the measures implemented by the government to address their learning needs?

5. What are the possible ways to ensure learning continuity of marginalized and disabled youths?

Section III: Methodology

Research Method, Tools and Analysis

Extensive desk review was conducted in reference to marginalized youths in Nepal, their challenges and with specific focus on the policies and plans prepared by the government in relation to facilitation of continuous learning during the pandemic. Various journal articles, discussion papers, PhD dissertations, policy papers assessed from government websites were used for the review. In order to understand the perception of youths and gain insight from their experiences, the study used qualitative method in the form of narrative inquiry. Silverman (2000) asserts that qualitative approaches better explain the phenomenon, meanings and description of events.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were carried out with all 16 research participants. NCE Nepal helped identify and coordinate with the participants and in-depth interviews were conducted by the researcher mainly through telephone. As the research was conducted when lockdown had been imposed by the government as a safety measure to control the spread of COVID-19, the interviewees could be contacted and interviewed only through telephone. Each participant was interviewed for an average of about 20 minutes asking her/him to share how they were engaged in learning during the pandemic, their challenges in accessing alternative learning mechanisms, hardships that they were going through due to the pandemic and their perception towards the learning modality adopted by their school, college or universities. 2 participants who were deaf were interviewed through Zoom Meeting Platform with the help of an interpreter. With the permission of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded for analysis purposes. The whole study period was from May to June, 2021.

The respondents were accessed mainly from Hilly as well as Terai regions of Nepal and from communities such as Tamang, Chepang, Dalits, Muslims and from Tharu community as well. Participants were from various districts (Udaypur, Kathmandu, Dang, Parsa, Dailekh, Argakhanchi, Lamjung, Makwanpur and Kailali). Altogether, 16 youths were interviewed. Among them, 9 were female and remaining were male participants. Further, 3 participants were blind (one female) and 2 female participants were deaf. All of the youths were from age group 15-24 years and were studying in public schools/ college or universities.

The criterion for selecting research participants were that they should be of:

a) Age group 15-24 years
b) From marginalized community or having disability
c) Studying in public school/college or university

The recorded data obtained from in-depth interviews were transcribed, coded and categorized (Creswell, 2012). Discussions were made under various themes which emerged from the interview. In-depth interviews helped analyze the perception of marginalized youths regarding the learning during the pandemic, their stance towards the methods adopted by their educational institution and the government, forms of oppression or discrimination that they have experienced directly or indirectly in relation to accessing educational resources during the pandemic and their view on how it will be affecting their future.

Research ethics was followed carefully through the study. Participants were requested to provide consent before commencing the interview and were also informed about anonymity and confidentiality. The identity of the participants has been protected in the study and pseudonyms have been used. All the participants provided consent for using their information for this research study.

Section IV: Attempts on Responding COVID-19 for Marginalized Youths

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) developed and implemented several policies and guidelines in order to respond to the educational disruption brought about by the COVID-19 especially in education of youths. These emergency action plans, guidelines and framework were formulated in order to establish a uniform mechanism in school education all over the country so that students could continue their learning with available resources. It provided directions to and stated responsibilities of schools, teachers, local governments and related stakeholders so that distant or online learning could be facilitated in an effective manner and the learning objectives would also be achieved. Emergency Action Plan for School Education, 2020; Student Learning Facilitation Guideline, 2020 and Framework for School Operation, 2020 were the major policy papers formulated by the government in relation to school education during this period. The following section has reviewed these policy papers along with other practices and operations of the government especially seeking to understand how these policies have envisioned supporting marginalized youths including youths with disability in their learning.

4.1 Emergency Action Plan for School Education, 2020

Emergency Action Plan for School Education, 2020 was the first plan formulated and implemented by the government in educational sector during the COVID-19 pandemic (MoEST, 2020a). The plan listed out 31 activities in order to facilitate learning during the pandemic, procedures for conducting these activities, timeline, implementing body and the supporting bodies. One of the most noticeable features of this plan is that it has envisioned devising learning materials and mechanisms on the basis of resources available with the learners. In a sense, the plan has recognized the unequal distribution of resources among learners and has accepted that all the learning resources and platforms may not be accessible to all. This document had planned to categorize students on the basis of accessibility to various alternative modes of learning:

a. Students having no access to any resources
b. Students having access to radio/FM
c. Students having access to television
d. Students having access to computers but no access to internet
e. Students having access to all kinds of resources

This was planned to be completed by October, 2020 for which schools and local government were designated as implementing bodies. This could help identify the needs of the learners and facilitate by designing and providing the learning resources to the learners using appropriate platforms which could help make distant learning effective. In order to facilitate self-learning, the plan envisioned dividing the curriculum or syllabus into parts which students can learn by themselves and which teachers need to facilitate. However, the plan has been limited to providing samples of such lessons or exercise and the schools and teachers need to design others. Even though the plan seems to be comprehensive, as the plan has not designated the monitoring body, implementation can be taken as a challenge.

The plan has declared that mobile data charges would be free of cost when accessing web portal (learning.cehrd.edu.np) of Center of Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) so that learners could easily access the learning resources. However, access to web portal is only possible

for those students having access to smartphone or laptop. Most noticeably, the plan has devised that it would design listening-viewing learning materials which would be aired through radio, TV and other mechanisms, it would not be appropriate for all the learners. For example, deaf students would require that the TV programmes would have sign language in the onset.

Further, the plan wants to encourage home schooling and involve family members in the learning activities of the students. In Nepali context, majority of the parents and guardians, especially from marginalized communities have difficulty in facilitating the students with learning activities which can cause serious learning problems for the students. Some of the activities listed in the plan seem to be unrealistic as well. For example, temporary learning facilitation centers are to be established for students unable to reach schools.

Some of the provisions such as visiting the house of student with disability to ensure learning and provide necessary facilitation seem unrealistic during the pandemic. From the perspective of marginalized youths studying in schools, this plan seems lacking and incomplete in terms of providing appropriate and practical support. Students from marginalized communities and those facing economic crisis are the most affected in lack of appropriate support from the government and schools.

4.2 Student Learning Facilitation Guideline, 2020

Government of Nepal, MoEST formulated this guideline exclusively in the context of COVID-19 so as to help learners at school level in Nepal to achieve the learning objectives set by Curriculum Development Center (CDC) by creating a suitable learning environment and facilitating well managed, continuous and effective learning activities. The document has provided directions to implementing bodies such as local government, school, CEHRD, provincial governments, CDC and parents and has specified their roles to facilitate learning during the pandemic. This guideline has specifically provided direction to principal and schools for collecting the information of learners and their access to resources and means and providing such records to the local level. This step is important as it would help the local government to prepare and disseminate the learning materials likewise.

This guideline specifies that schools are required to prepare detailed workplan for facilitating learning after analyzing the status of students or learners in their locality in terms of access to resources and such workplan need to be approved by the local body and implemented. The plan has repeatedly asked the stakeholders to consider the length of academic year remaining and the learning objectives set by CDC while designing appropriate methods and tools for facilitating the learners. In terms of the categorization, it is obvious that the students who do not have access to any technical resources are the most disadvantaged. Further, this is also the group where most of the students from economically marginalized families and communities belong to. In such a case, where other students have the privilege and opportunity to choose from multiple learning resources, they are at risk of lagging behind in terms of education. Further, the guideline has opted for providing hard copies and printouts of the materials including those prepared online, small group-wise learning in the community maintaining social distance by the volunteers and encouraging guardians to assist in the learning by means of home schooling. In such a case, where there is a lockdown in place, it is often impractical to conduct small gathering or group learning by bringing students together or delivering such learning materials to the students. As mentioned earlier, majority of the parents from marginalized communities lack knowledge and skills to support students which can be another challenge in facilitating learning at home.

Even though the guideline can be taken as a positive step for facilitating learning during the pandemic, there are certain aspects which needs to be addressed form the perspectives of marginalized youths and youths with disabilities. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and The World Bank (2020) assert that while it is always a good practice to involve parents and caregivers in the education of their children through support in homework and encouraging attendance, they are usually not responsible for teaching their children. Further, parents, specially those having to take care of learners with disabilities need to act as their caregiver as well as their teacher, which can be challenging. Caregivers often have other priorities (such as to earn or work) and have limited experience with teaching. Further, it is often noticed that children and even youths with disabilities face stigma and discrimination deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and practices which puts them at a disadvantage. It can limit them from participating in the community level group-wise learning activities as envisioned by the above guideline.

The guideline has provided that the learning resources can be available in learning portals (learning. cehrd.edu.np), You tube channels (www.youtube.com/ncedvirtual) and e-library of CDC ([www. moecdc.giv.np](www.moecdc.giv.np)) and the link is centrally available at (www.doe.gov.np). This is a positive step towards guiding all the learners and teachers to access the resources where such resources would not be generally used in regular teaching and learning activities in Nepal. However, in case of facilitating learning through radio and TV or even through the videos provided in the learning portals, it fails to incorporate the needs of learners with disabilities. In case of learners with disabilities, while audio transmission of learning materials might be comparatively helpful for blind students, it might be of no use to deaf students. Each of the categories of students need appropriate, specialized or differentiated learning materials so that all students can equitably access and make effective use of the resources. Especially for disabled learners and learners not having access to resources, the guideline has specified that special assistance would be provided through the local government and stresses that there should be a separate learning facilitation. However, the guideline has not specified procedures on how the local government would support the learners and the nature of the support.

4.3 Framework for School Operation, 2020

The Framework for School Operation, 2020 (MoEST, 2020c) formulated and implemented by MoEST has provided directions, measures and strategies to be adopted by the educational institutions before reopening the schools which were closed due to the pandemic. The guideline has mentioned measures to be taken before reopening school, while the school is in operation and continuous monitoring and supervision of educational institutions. Further, in case of rise in COVID-19 cases, the guideline suggests that the local governments would provide direction to the schools for shutdown and continuation of learning through alternative means as mentioned in Student Facilitation Learning Guideline, 2020.

The guideline provides direction to the local governments to hold elaborate discussions with the local representatives, educationists, teacher association, principals, teachers and members of SMC and PTA, health workers, members of children/youth groups to review the basis for reopening the schools. Various strategies have been put forward by the guideline for safely opening the schools such as: running all the classes at once, running classes in shifts, decreasing the class time, running classes on alternate days, and dividing the students into different groups. The guideline also specifies that preparation strategies to be adopted by the local government and schools when deciding to reopen the school such as ensuring that the schools are sanitized appropriately, disinfecting the schools

which were used as quarantine and isolation centers, making arrangements for furniture, washrooms, making arrangements for help-desks, making arrangements for special facilities, remedial classes, day lunch for students with disability and from poor families.

One of the important aspects of this guideline is that it has focused on preparing students and parents by providing psychological counselling before coming to schools, which is a new dynamic in Nepalese education system. It is important to provide counselling when students are returning to schools after a long period of time and where parents may also feel unsecure to send children to school due to the implications of the pandemic. It is even more important for students with disability and students from marginalized community are to be provided with support and encouragement to return to school especially if they have had to discontinue their studies due to unavailability of learning resources or other household problems. In case of students with disability, the guideline underlines that even parents or guardians of students are to be provided with such counselling. Schools are also required to prepare ethical guideline or safety protocol to be followed when in school and at home and it is to be ensured that the protocol is being followed. In case of students from economically marginalized families, schools are required to provide masks with support and coordination of the local level.

However, in case of students with disability, the guidelines states that if students cannot be brought to the school immediately, learning should be continued at home through alternative ways. It has already been noted earlier that student with disability often lack appropriate resources and access to such resources which will affect their learning in such cases. The guideline instructs for providing training and orientation to teachers and staffs working in resource classes and special schools. It has not mentioned what kind of training would be provided to teachers and staffs. In a nutshell, this guideline has delegated majority of the practical responsibilities to the local level including evaluation, monitoring and facilitating safe operation of school and educational practices.

4.4. Other Practices of Government during COVID-19 for facilitation of learning in schools

The above plans are comprehensive in nature as they suggest ways and strategies in which learning can be continued during the pandemic. However, the above plans have provided minimum spaces for addressing the learning needs of students/ youths with disability and marginalized youths in an effective manner. These plans tend to favor students who have access to various resources such as computers, smartphones, TV and radios. In the above discussions, it is already stated that in the absence of effective mechanism to support students/youths with disability and marginalized youths, it can not only reinforce inequalities and discrimination prevalent in our society but also further deprive the youths of their future, aspirations and hope.

There are other practices apart from the above plans which have been implemented by the government and in partnerships with various NGOs for facilitation of continuous learning during the pandemic. One of such practices is the implementation of Curriculum Adjustment Framework, 2020 formulated by Curriculum Development Center (CDC) under MoEST (CDC, 2020) on the basis of Student Learning Facilitation Guideline, 2020. This Framework was designed in order to facilitate teachers to ensure that students have achieved minimum learning objectives through alternative means of learning during the pandemic. The framework has classified the lessons in terms of those that need teachers support and facilitation and those that can be learnt by students with the help of parents on the direction of teachers at home. The framework has provided lessons, learning objective, parts of lesson to be facilitated by teachers and parts of the lessons to be facilitated through the help of parents

or others on the direction of teachers of all subjects. The guideline is separately prepared for grades 1 to 3, grades 4 to 5, grades 6 to 8 and grades 9 to 10.

Even though this framework provides ways in which minimum learning objectives can be achieved, its efficiency depends on effective implementation. One of the major challenges is regarding home schooling, which is a very new issue in case of many Nepali parents. As stated earlier, studies made by Humanity and Inclusion (2020), majority of parents 86% out of 677 parents/caregivers of children with disability expressed that their children did not have access to learning materials and only 52% are providing support in their child's reading. Further, 31% of the parents reported that distraction by other children in the house is an obstacle in supporting their children in continuing learning. These context point towards a risk that many students/ youths with disability and marginalized youths can fall behind in learning.

Center for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) has published learning materials for self-study and learning and which can be facilitated by guardians for pre-primary levels and up to grade 8. The materials are available in the website of CEHRD https://www.doe.gov.np/article/1101/test.html and can be downloaded. However, downloading such materials would require internet and further it is of limited use without printing facilities. Further, even though the materials are very helpful to majority of students, students with disability mainly having sight problems will be at a disadvantage in using these learning materials.

Further, CEHRD has published notice regarding websites where useful learning materials can be available and downloaded from (figure 3). Lessons have been uploaded in You Tube channel (NCED Virtual) prepared by CEHRD on the basis of curriculum for all the grades and subjects. The videos are of good quality in terms of the learning content. However, the main concern is about access. Without internet connectivity, smartphones or computers, these materials can only be helpful for those students who have access to resources. Again, mainly marginalized students/youths are at disadvantage in using these resources. As these videos do not use sign language, it is a barrier for deaf students as they can only view the videos and it is also of limited use to blind students.

The learning portal of CEHRD (https://learning.cehrd.edu.np/) has limited contents. For example, in case of grade 9, only 3 subjects have been provided: English, Math and Science. Limited chapters have been provided within these subjects. If the lessons are accessed, students are provided with videos of the lessons being taught by a teacher. However, these materials are also accessible only to students with resources and are almost of limited use to deaf and blind students. It can be argued that these resources, plans and policies seem to favor students with access to resources with limited or almost no appropriate options provided to marginalized students and youths with disability.

It is therefore, important to consider if a different mechanism/ policy needs to set for students with disability and marginalized students from the central level and which can be practically implemented at the local level. Having a different mechanism for targeted students (marginalized students) in consultation with educationists working with children/youths with disability or marginalized students, parents, principals and teachers, SMC members of specialized schools can help understand their needs and issues and facilitate towards providing specialized care for these students so that their learning would not be interrupted.

4.5 Guideline for Learning Facilitation through Alternative Mechanism in Higher Education, 2020

University Grants Commission has formulated guidelines in order to address the current situation of COVID-19 in university and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), to encourage continuation of learning through electronic and alternative mediums and in order to minimize the loss in the educational sector due to the pandemic. The guideline has taken e-learning as learning through the use of computer, radio, television, other information and communication technology and through internet. It directs the universities and HEIs to bring together the practices of traditional and e-learning mechanisms and prepare strategies to ensure that the teaching learning system is comprehensive, student centred and technology friendly and encourages for maximum usage of such mechanism.

This guideline has instructed the HEIs to manage and strengthen the infrastructures required for e-learning. The infrastructures mentioned are basic and fundamental requirements that HEIs need to have for modern day education and include that every HEI should have an ICT department with necessary human resource, HEIs should have their own online domain and all students, staffs and faculty members are to be provided with email ID, regular operation and update of the College website, all services such as student registration, curriculum registration, exam records, electronic fee payment system, feedback and complaint mechanism are to be integrated online, management of e-learning system and e-evaluation of students, and dedicated internet for HEIs. These infrastructures are basic for any HEI at present and also required for the Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) provided by UGC Nepal. Students could have continued learning if these infrastructures had been placed by the HEIs well before as these are basic facilities to be made available in colleges. Even though these facilities are available in high-end colleges and especially in cities, colleges in rural areas and majority of community and public campuses lack these facilities (Gautam and Gautam, 2021).

Further, the guideline has also focused on formulation and implementation of ICT policy and encouraging adherence to moral and professional ethics while providing services through usages of ICT. The guideline has directed for training of faculty members and orientation to students in regard to using ICT facility. Even though the guideline has envisioned and provided permission for using virtual laboratory activities, there is no clear statistics regarding how many colleges in Nepal can actually use virtual laboratories. Especially in faculties such as science, lab activities are an important component of the syllabus and essential for acquiring skills for research activities. In such a case, it is pertinent to provide effective lab facilities (virtually as well) and it is necessary to ensure and monitor that such activities are effective and the lesson objectives have been achieved.

UGC Nepal has envisioned categorization of students on the basis of their access to resources similar to the one envisioned by MoE for school level students. Students have been categorized as those having computer or computing materials such as computers, smartphones and tablet with internet facilities; having access to computers but not having internet connection or having access to radios and TV channels and those without any such resources. The guideline provides that relevant models of teaching and learning should be made available by the universities on the basis of the resource students have. However, until now such audio-visual materials such as for radio or television are not found to have been prepared by any universities as such. In such a case, even though this guideline has made elaborate discussion on how learning can be continued even during the pandemic or lockdown when physical classes are not possible, there are questions on its implementation. With the kind of resources that public colleges in Nepal have access to complete implementation of this guideline is a challenge.

Section V: Challenges Faced by Marginalized Youths

5.1 Challenges faced by marginalized youths in learning in the context of COVID-19

This section deals with exploring how COVID-19 has affected the education of marginalized youths and various pedagogical, financial as well as social challenges they have to face in accessing and continuing their learning.

5.1.1 Educational activities at a standstill mostly in remote areas among marginalized youths

Most of the participants in the study, especially from terai region and remote hilly districts shared that they have not had any classes throughout the lockdown period. Even though the guidelines prepared by the government provide directions for schools and local governments to keep record of the students and their access to various resources for facilitating the learning, it was seen that many students, especially those studying in community schools and colleges had not received any sort of facilitation from the school, college or the local government. For example, Anjana (name changed), who is from a Muslim community and from one of the districts in the Terai shared that neither she nor any of her friends have taken any classes online or through any other medias like T.V. or radio throughout the lockdown period. One of the other participants reported that his school had been providing online classes for students studying in grades 8 and 10 only as they had to appear in standard examinations.

Grishma (name changed), who is studying in a public campus shared how she had to do self-study for a complete year to appear in the final examination taken by the university. She shared,

> "We did not learn anything during the lockdown. There were no classes online or offline. I as well as all my friends studying in our campus gave exams by doing self-study. College did not inform us about any such online classes as well. My major is Math and without teachers' support how could I understand the concepts? Even though I appeared for the exam, I still have not understood many of the chapters and concepts as we did not take a single class of the subject. There was no one to help me too."

Dipak (name changed) had the similar story that he has to do self-study and there is no other option. When listening to their stories, it is as if the educational activities in many remote areas have come to a standstill. There are no whereabouts of students from the school and students voice their concern regarding why are teachers and schools not concerned about them. Rashmi (name changed), from a remote area in Dailekh shared that she has studied only 4 months when the school was open in between the first and second lockdown. Apart from that, she has not received any classes through alternative medias as envisioned by the government. Another participant reported that if the schools had provided online classes, may be many students would participate in the class.

It is clear that these young students are concerned of their future and have a desire to continue learning but have been deprived of their right to education. With guidelines and protocols set up by the government being limited to the papers and not in practice, it is obvious, that these young students are being deprived of their future opportunities and their hopes and aspirations. It can be seen that there is lack of monitoring by the local government and other responsible authorities as schools have not yet maintained records of what type of access to resources their students have, which was the primary requirement in the guidelines for facilitating students through alternative ways. Without proper records of the students, it is still uncertain how students are accessing learning, how they might be studying and how schools will evaluate them in this academic year.

5.1.2 Lack of appropriate resources for learning

Students from marginalized community shared that they were deprived of learning opportunities due to the lack of basic resources required for distance learning. Many students have not been able to participate in online learning facilitated by the schools due to lack of devices such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, computers and mainly internet facilities. Most of the students who are from financially deprived families have a hard time affording internet facility for up to 3 to 4 hours a day for online classes. Rina (name changed), who is studying at a community school in Kathmandu shared that,

> *"Many students like me who are from poor families cannot afford internet for online classes. My father worked as a porter for shops, but due to the lockdown, he has lost his job. My family has a hard time even getting food, and how can I ask my parents to buy me internet packs for online classes. I don't think I can take online classes."*

Many families and especially those from marginalized and poor communities are going through financial hardship as many have lost their jobs and even businesses due to the pandemic. In such a case, many families cannot afford internet packages for their children's learning. Anjana shared that most of the students do not have smartphone and internet facility and that is also the reason why schools have not provided online classes as many students do not attend the class. Anita (name changed) is visually impaired and is studying in grade 11. She said that her school has been providing online classes but she is unable to take the class as she does not have access to internet facility.

Further, even though the guidelines have stated that learning should be facilitated to students on the basis of access to resources they have, it was seen that schools were using or providing only one particular modality for facilitation of learning. For example, if schools were providing classes online, then it was seen that almost nothing was being done for students who could not access online classes.

Dinesh (name changed) shared that he was from a very remote place. His village still does not have electricity and there is no access to internet as well. He was staying in a rented room at Hetauda to study and is at the moment unable to pay the rent and for his daily expenses. His family has also not been able to support him lately as they have no work at present. He shared that if he had the opportunity, he would like to take classes online form village, but as there is no internet facility, it's like a compulsion to study from the rented room. Ranju (name changed) said that she was not studying at the moment because she cannot buy internet data package everyday due to the financial problems.

One of the important implications of not being able to access internet for learning or participating in the online class is the digital divide that is deepening in our society and students are also fearful this situation would force them to be left behind in terms of their education as well as social development. Dawadi et al. (2020) argue that in the advent of COVID-19, the digital divide and the uneven access to e-learning and e-resources will increase the gaps even further by widening the inequalities between the advantaged and disadvantaged children. If this would continue, it is highly probable that those lacking access to resources will be at a greater disadvantage at getting future opportunities which can lead to even more discrimination and widening of the existing social inequality. Shrestha, & Gnawali (2021) argue that some of the clause of the guidelines seem to totally favour the learners having access to all kinds of resources and also further augment the digital divide in the long run.

5.1.3 School related challenges

It was evident that most of the schools in remote districts and in the Terai had not facilitated learning through any of the alternative mediums as stated in the guidelines. Even when the school had reopened after the first lockdown ended, students voiced their concern that they had not been able to take regular classes. Most of the schools operated on alternate days and most of the teachers were frequently absent even during those days. Some of the participants shared that the schools and college never provided any notice or information regarding online class or how they should be learning at their homes during the lockdown or in the extended periods when the schools were closed. Others shared that they had no idea what was going on about their study and in which modality the exams would take place. Students were unaware and uninformed about what they were to do and how their schools and teachers would help them complete the course or curriculum on time. It was seen that many schools lacked efficient and effective management and monitoring.

Most of the participants shared that they were not having online classes as schools told them that they wanted to take classes online but since many students did not have access to internet or devices, they could not operate classes online. In other cases, even when students have opportunity for online classes, participants shared their dissatisfaction with schools about the way online classes were taking place. Rajiv (name changed) believes that if there were opportunities for attending physical classes, it would be much helpful as he thinks that there is less interaction in the online classes. He shared how he was slowly losing interest towards learning as it had become monotonous and felt like the teacher was the only one speaking in the class. Rashi (name changed) shared that,

> *"I think college is not serious about our studies and our future at all. Those at cities are having regular online classes and are learning continually. Definitely they will do well in exams as well as get better opportunities in the future as well. We in villages have not had the opportunity to study. It will impact our future. Many of us even have lost habit and interest of studying and students may want to continue staying at home. Why isn't government or university serios about this? If they were serious, wouldn't they monitor or hold colleges responsible for how colleges were taking classes these days? It seems like the local government does not have any idea at all about what is going on."*

Rashi's statement represented her frustration at not being able to participate in online classes and her dissatisfaction with the local government and even university. Her concern indicates that she feels discriminated as it seems like universities are only concerned of how studies are taking place in cities and they do not have any data or report of how colleges are taking classes during the time when colleges are closed in the villages. Schools and colleges seemed to be dysfunctional especially in the villages and remote areas as almost none of the alternative mediums were being mobilized to facilitate learning for the students. It also implies that the guidelines are not being implemented and there is lack of monitoring from the responsible authority.

5.1.4 Teacher related challenges

Teachers are the most important resource in any educational setting whether the classes are taken face-to-face or through online or distance mode. In the study, it was seen that students appreciated as well as voiced their concern about the teachers' activities regarding continuing learning during the pandemic. Anshu (name changed) argues that she feels that many teachers still lack necessary skills for taking and handling classes online. She shared that her school had to start the online classes later than many schools as her schools lacked resources for online classes as well as teachers needed training to take classes online.

Manisha (name changed) shared that her school was providing online classes from 7 to 10 am and all the teachers were taking classes well. She appreciated that way teachers responded to her queries which she could send after the class through applications like messenger or viber and shared that her teachers kept regular record of attendance and assignments as well. However, not all of them share the same delight. Most of the participants in the study shared that even when schools had reopened after the first lockdown had ended, teachers often did not come to school to take classes. Some of the students voiced their concern that even if school reopens after the lockdown, if same strategy is used by schools as when the first lockdown had ended such as running schools on alternated days, it would not be helpful because they had experienced that many teachers did not attend schools on alternate days.

Mohammad (name changed) argued that he had studied for only 5 months in the school. He had to appear for the SEE examination held by National Examination Board (NEB). But he did not have any online classes and he did not receive any support from the teachers once the lockdown started. He used Google to look for some of the answers or used You Tube to find solutions to some of the problems, but he couldn't understand anything. Rajesh (name changed), who is from a poor family, and from a remote district in Nepal shared that it was so frustrating that he had to spend so much money just to buy the internet data and even more frustrating was when his teachers would not take classes. He felt hurt when teachers did not take classes when he had to save every penny to take the class. Even though he is provided with a class routine by the college, teachers seldom take classes as per the routine. When he and his friends would ask teachers why they could not take class, teachers would reply that they had electricity or internet connection problem so they could not take the class.

For visually impaired students like Mina (name changed), it is even more challenging to participate classes online. She uses Text-to-Speech converter to study from the notes sent by the teacher through online platforms like messenger. However, she shared that most of the times teachers sent photos of the text, which could not be converted into speech by the software as the characters are unrecognizable in the photos. Had it been a pdf or a software readable copy or a typed note, she could have easily accessed the notes. She shared that sometimes teachers were inconsiderate of her that she was visually impaired and needed assistance to access the notes. At other times, her younger brother read to her the notes and she would learn by listening to him. Further, all the teachers in her college do not know how to write in Braille, which is another problem in the classroom.

5.1.5 Financial challenges faced by marginalized youths

One of the main reasons why students were unable to join online classes even though when schools provided them was their financial condition. Many young people study and do some part time jobs at the same time. However, due to the lockdown, many youths have lost their jobs and even have had to return to their hometown or villages, some have made up their mind not to return soon. It implies that there is even a greater chance of increase in dropout rates. Alsiha Pariyar (name changed) shared that her father used to work as a daily wage labor in construction sites before the lockdown but now he has lost his job. His mother owns a small shop which is closed too. He shared that many students like him are unable to take classes Online because they cannot afford Internet packages and they don't have appropriate devices for learning. He mentioned that those who did not have the opportunity to study during this time may have high tendency to drop out as they have missed many lessons lately.

Raja (name changed), who is from a Chepang community from a remote village in Makwanpur shared that his parents are engaged in traditional farming and they only grow corn enough for their own family. He shared that Chepangs are marginalized because since many generations they have remained poor and illiterate. He asserted that,

> *"We are poor and backward because our ancestors (fathers and grandfathers) did not study. They were illiterate, and had no idea of doing modern agriculture or business. Now our young generations have begun to understand that education is the key to move out of this poverty and backwardness and are interested in learning. I came to city to study and pursue my dream of being an overseer after studying Science in high school but my parents are unable to support me now due to this pandemic. I want to return to my village because I cannot afford to stay here. I have planned to go village even if I have to go walking. I have had enough of this. I cannot take it anymore."*

Raja's views help us understand that even though he has dreams and aspirations to study and has recognized that education is the key that will help him and his family move out of poverty, but due to financial burdens, he cannot continue his study. Mohani (name changed), who is also from Chepang community shared similar story who had to return to her village after her parents could not afford to pay the rent of room nearby her college during the first lockdown. Even after the first lockdown when college had physical classes for about two months, she walked for 2 hours to reach college from her village. She had made up her mind that she will travel to college to study even though it was tiring and troublesome. But the second lockdown forced her to stay at her house without access to online classes due to lack of device and internet service. She feels at disadvantage because she made her mind to overcome the challenges, but now she has no option as she is deprived of online classes.

Similarly, Maya (name changed) from Dang shared that she worked as a part time teacher in a boarding school but since the school is closed, she has not been able to work and she has not received her salary either. She also studies in a college but being jobless and with financial burden, she cannot afford to take online classes. She was the one mainly to support her parents financially but the pandemic has hit her hard as she is fearful of how her family will make through this tough situation. Many youths have lost their jobs, and at the same time their family are also unable to support them financially. This has also had its impact on their access to learning and increased the risk of dropout.

5.1.6 Challenges faced by youths with disability

Youths with disability had challenges of their own when it came to accessing and continuing learning. Three of the participants in the study were visually impaired and two of the participants had hearing disability. Out of the three visually impaired participants, particularly two of the participants shared their challenges in accessing learning.

Ranju (name changed) who is from Argakhanchi shared that her college was closed and she had to do self-study. She informed that even though she wanted to do self-study, books are not available in Braille for her and she has no idea how she will prepare for her exams. When she was attending physical classes, she was provided with audio recording by NGOs to help her with learning. She brought them home and used it to make notes. But with unavailability of physical classes, she does not have access to those audio recordings as well. She remembers how she could interact with teachers and her friends and ask when she had any problem during the physical class but she does not have access to any learning materials.

Mohan (name changed), who was studying at Kathmandu University shared that he was taking online classes from home and was doing quite well. When inquired how we was doing it, he shared that with access to technology and with a little know-how, visually impaired can easily have access to learning. Mostly in his classes, teachers use presentation slides which he can easily convert to speech through some simple software and he can make notes. Also, he sends his assignments to teachers by typing in his laptop which makes it much easier. He shared that his college has made a provision to give exams by typing in Word file due to which he does not need to depend on anyone while appearing for exams. These arrangements have made it much easier for him. He shared that, *"If visually impaired students are provided with practical knowledge on how to use various software and computer for learning, I am sure none of the visually impaired need to stay helpless during these situations. Today, even visually impaired have access to learning materials with just a little digital literacy."*

However, he also mentioned some problems he has to go through. He mentioned that often schools send photos of various notices which are unreadable by the software. In such a case, he has a very hard time getting informed and often has to take his friends' help to know the information. At other times, he has often felt his teachers are sometimes inconsiderate about him in the class and teachers indicate in the presentation slides while teaching. "For a visually impaired students, it makes no sense what the teacher is indicating in the presentation slide or whiteboard unless he/she tells you what it actually is that he/she is indicating", he shared.

Anuradha (name changed) who has hearing disability shared that she has access to online classes but the classes are ineffective as teachers do not take regular classes. They have been provided with class routine but teachers seldom follow the routine. Out of 70 students in her class, only 12 to 15 students participate in the online class. Teachers use sign language to teach her but due to poor internet connection, she often has problem understanding the signs and sometimes does not understand the lessons. One of the main problems she faced was that whenever she wanted to ask question to her teaches, she waved her hand in the screen, but the teacher never noticed her. She shared that if she could speak, she would turn on the microphone and ask questions to the teacher, but due to her disability she is unheard by the teachers. Her queries therefore, often remain unanswered.

At other times, she reported how she and her friends had to keep waiting for their teachers online for the scheduled class but often teachers never showed up and she felt frustrated. It felt as if like waste of time and resources. Many of friends slowly gave up attending online classes due to this frequent absenteeism of teachers. Even though she sends her assignments through Viber messages, she has never received any feedbacks. She shared how difficult it was for her especially in the Math class. She reported that,

> *"Especially in math class, teachers made ready-made notes and shared the screen in the class. In order to explain to us, the teachers simply indicated with circles to show us the important points in the solution. Without any sign language when he/she shared the screen, we have no idea what we are being taught. All we can see is some circles being made by the teachers above the ready-made notes. It is not effective at all. How can we understand the solution this way?"*

The problem she faced is experienced by many disabled students who are being deprived of quality education and student-centered learning. She shared that the teachers often just taught what they came to teach and are not even concerned if students had any questions or whether they understood

the lesson or not. It was as if like they were just doing their duty. Further, one of the participants shared that many teachers in university levels do not know standard sign language and use casual sign languages they like to use.

5.1.7 Challenges in Practical Classes

Many students voiced their concerns on not being able to take practical classes. For certain faculties like Science and other subjects like Computer Science, practical lessons are very important to enhance their skills as well as some laboratory experiments are designed to complement the theoretical lessons. Even though the guidelines, especially provided to the universities and colleges have provisions for making necessary arrangements for facilitating practical classes and sessions online, but none of the participants in the study had the opportunity to take such classes. Students were unaware of virtual laboratories and never had any practical classes since the schools/colleges were closed.

Ankit (name changed) shared that even though he was studying science in the college, he has not been provided with practical classes. He said that his teachers had provided few practical classes in the laboratory when the physical classes were running. When he asked the teacher about how they will appear for practical examinations as they had done only few lab sessions, his teacher told him not to worry and questions would be asked only from those topics which have been taught in the lab. He further shared that, *"Of course, this will help us to pass the exams, but what about our future. If all the learning objectives set out in the curriculum is not met, we will miss many important concepts and may not be qualified enough to study further."* Rojina (name changed) expressed that though she was studying computer science, she had never been to the computer lab when physical classes were running and now when studying online, there is no chance for practical sessions. She shared, *"If we never used computer and only learned about computer, how are we supposed to use computer in daily life? We are taught theory only."*

Students are concerned about their practical classes and understand that in the absence of adequate practical sessions, it is going to affect their study. Colleges seem reluctant on managing virtual laboratories or in planning the practical sessions online, which is a challenge for the students.

5.2 Impact on Livelihoods of Marginalized Youths in COVID-19

The following section has discussed ways in which COVID-19 has impacted the livelihoods of marginalized youths.

5.2.1 Lost jobs and source of income

It was found that some of the participants in the study were engaged in learning and also working part time in order to manage their expenses and also to support their families. COVID-19 had severely impacted their source of income due to the lockdown and businesses being closed. Mohammad Ansari (name changed), who has just completed his SEE lives with his mother. She used to work in a tailoring shop before the lockdown. Due to the lockdown, the shop has been closed and she has not been able to earn since then. Mohammad had been learning about motorcycle servicing and repair form a nearby motorcycle workshop. He used to visit the shop after returning from school. Recently, he had been able to fix punctures, as well carry out simple repairs. He had expected to earn some money from the workshop when due to the lockdown the workshop had been closed. He was worried that the savings his mother had made was being used up and that very soon he and his mother would be helpless. He eagerly expected the businesses to restart so that he could earn some money for his family.

Similar experience was shared by Ranju (name changed), who is from Dang. She shared that most of her friends were part time teachers in private boarding schools like her. But, since the schools were closed for many months, the schools couldn't pay the regular salary. Now, it had become a challenge to meet the personal daily needs as well. Marginalized youths, mostly being from families with difficult financial conditions, are often seen engaged in some part time jobs apart from their studies. For many, they are engaged full time in employment. The pandemic has made them vulnerable as they have lost their jobs, lost financial support they could provide to their families, often leading them to borrow from others and even leading them into debt and further marginalization due to poverty.

5.2.2 Pandemic induced internal migration, search for alternative jobs and its implications

Some of the participants in the study had returned to their home towns due to the lockdown and some had now returned to their villages permanently. Other participants mentioned in the interview that many of their classmates had already left for villages and some were unable to attend online classes from the villages. Few youths in the study mentioned that they had been working in the cities in shops as assistants but now had to return and do farming. Few other participants mentioned planning to go for foreign employment once they have the opportunity. They did not have such thoughts of choosing foreign employment before but the pandemic has affected them and their families economically as well which has made them think of it as well. One of the participants, Tanka (name changed) shared that,

> "I always told my friends not to go for foreign employment and to do something in our own country. I used to tell them that there are opportunities in Nepal as well. This pandemic has hit so hard upon my family that my father who used to work in a sugar mill has lost his job. Now our family is starting to feel the financial pressure. My parents have hopes from me. At the moment, I cannot see any other option than to go for foreign employment and support my family. I have started to realize that for marginalized youths like us, opportunities are being scarcer in Nepal.'

Many youths like Tanka have made up their minds to go for foreign employment as the pandemic has hit hard upon the families economically. In the absence of any job opportunities here or with limited prospect of getting employment immediately, youths are searching for opportunities abroad to support themselves and their families. Many are at the risk of falling into poverty, and at the same time being vulnerable to malnourishment, undernourishment, psychological and financial burdens.

5.2.3 Ray of hope amidst the crisis

Most of the participants voiced their fear, confusion and concern over livelihood issues due to implications of COVID-19. However, some of the participants showed positive attitude in facing this crisis. One of the participants, Rashmi (name changed) from Chitwan, who has hearing impairment expressed her dissatisfaction over the academic facilitation provided by her college during the pandemic, but was enthusiastic to share about her engagement in the online graphic designing training provided by an NGO. She shared that,

> "I am happy that the NGO has provided me the opportunity to participate in the Graphic Designing training during this lockdown. The facilitators from the NGO are providing us excellent online training and support, responding responsibly to our queries and supporting us that I have started to realize the prospect of choosing graphic designing as

my career. I don't know whether the academic program can help me, but I am sure this skill that I am learning can help me to some extent in supporting myself.'

It was encouraging to know that even though Rashmi had hearing impairment, she was able to engage herself in training which could help her attain skill and later even a job. This lockdown has stood as an opportunity for her to excel in her graphic designing skills. It shows that if similar training opportunities could be provided to youths during the pandemic through online or alternative mediums, it could be really productive for the youths.

5.3 Perception of Marginalized Youths towards Learning during the Pandemic

The following section has explored how marginalized youths including those with disability have perceived learning through alternative ways envisioned by the government and provided by the schools.

5.3.1 Sense of helplessness

Most of the participants in the study mentioned that learning though online or through alternative ways was ineffective and insufficient for them. Most of the marginalized youths in the study did not have the appropriate resources for accessing learning materials and online platforms which often discouraged them from even doing self-study at home. Concerns regarding teachers not following the class routine, very less classes scheduled by the school, assignments not being provided or being graded add to their problems of having weak internet connection and not being able to participate effectively in the class.

For some students, it has been months since they have taken any classes and have already missed so many lessons. Mohammad (name changed) shared,

> *"I do not know how I will study later because lots of lesson has been missed. I have notes only of those lessons which teacher taught us during physical classes. I think we will have to focus more on our studies in coming days to cover the loss in our studies due to this lockdown."*

He is studying in grade 10, and there was still uncertainty of whether there will be Secondary Education Examination (SEE) taken by the Nepal Examination Board (NEB). He was worried and shared that,

> *"I have younger brothers at home and I help them study. But who will help me? My parents are not so educated to help me in my studies and I don't have anyone whom I can ask the questions that I find difficult to solve."*

Anjana (name changed), who is from a district in Terai shared that she and her friend had even requested school and the teachers to provide them some help with their studies and if possible, to provide few physical classes for difficult subjects maintaining social distance. She mentioned that they were unheard. She was worried and anxious when classes would start or whether she will get to study again.

From the interviews, it was clear that youths were anxious about their study. They felt helpless as they could not participate in the online classes due to their financial hardship or as the colleges had not provided any online classes to them.

5.3.2 Questions on Equity and Inclusion

The Consolidate Equity Strategy formulated by Ministry of Education (2014) is said to have been based on the principles of social inclusion and equity and it aims to strengthen equity in access, participation and learning outcomes. The Strategy has in its focus the children with disability as well. However, there were concerns from youths with disability in the study regarding equity and inclusion in their learning. As schools are physically closed and schools are facilitating learning through alternative mediums, questions have been raised by youths about the extent to which these facilitations have been inclusive or equitable and how far have schools and teachers been able to understand their needs. Rashmi (name changed) argued that,

> "Government has provided audio-visual learning materials such as videos for those who have access to internet or T.V., but me as a student having hearing disability have a very hard time learning through these videos. If only we were provided with sign-language in the inset within the video itself, I could also participate in the learning process."

Rashmi's views express desperation to engage in learning but she is concerned at the insensitiveness of the government while preparing these videos. It is painful for them as they felt discriminated or as if like they are uncared for by the State. Mohan (name changed), who is visually impaired argues that keeping children in the same class cannot be called an inclusive class. The facilities provided in the class need to be accessible equitably by all. For example, he says,

> "In the name of inclusion, we as visually impaired have to study with those without disability. It is fine but when we are taken to computer labs, the schools do not even install a small software with the help of which even blind can use the computer, by converting the text to speech. Let's forget about the software, many computer labs do not even have a headset for us so that we can listen to the speech which helps us use the computer. The true meaning of inclusive can be evident only when there is equitable access to the facilities by all."

Rashmi also shared the view that she being a deaf cannot learn along with those who can hear in the same class. "It will be very difficult for the teachers as well", she shared. Youths with disability do understand the problems they are facing in accessing learning and even have good solutions to them but often they are unheard, ignored and not considered even by schools and teachers. Even in the website of CEHRD, there are self -study learning materials for school level students, but these materials are not accessible or useable to students with disability. In such a case, marginalized youths and youths with disability are often at disadvantage compared to those with access to resources.

Ranjan (name changed), who is visually impaired and is studying law in the university at the moment shared multiple forms of discrimination he has faced due to his disability. These discriminations somehow are related to education and learning. Ranjan shared that one of the discriminations he has faced is at the banks and financial institutions. His experience is that blind people are not allowed to have bank accounts, the reason given by the banks is that they cannot make signatures. Ranjan argues that during the lockdown, transactions are increasingly happening through mobile banking and he cannot access these facilities. Even for paying internet bills or recharging his mobile balance, which are very important for accessing online classes are not possible for him as he does not have access to mobile banking. Also, he shared that the latest budget formulated by the Nepal government has

announced providing easy loans up to Rs. 80,000 for students for buying laptops to access learning. He argues that when he does not even have a bank account, how can banks provide him loan. He is discouraged and feels discriminated as a person with disability at the insensitiveness of the State towards youths with disability like him.

5.3.3. Fear of dropout

Some of the participants in the study voiced their concern whether the only option if they could not participate in the learning would be to dropout. In case when students are away from the learning for a long period of times, there are increased risk of increase in dropouts. Further, the lockdown has its impact on the students, especially for those from marginalized communities. Some of the students have already made their minds that they would need to seek jobs once the lockdown ends to support their family as business have been closed due to lockdown or their parents have lost jobs. Anjali (name changed) argued that,

> *"In our community, usually girls are not sent to school, but our parents have given us this opportunity to study. But due to this pandemic, we have not been able to study at all as schools are closed and there is no alternative facilitation from the school as well. Many students, especially girls from my community have lost hope and they have made up their minds not to continue their study."*

For many students, education is the only ray of hope they have for their family and community and that hope seems to be fading slowly. Participants in the study even shared how some of their friends have been told by the family that there is no need to study from now on and to look for work once the lockdown ends. Probably if students were facilitated with continuous learning from school or even local governments, they would be engaged in learning and would not have to think of dropping out.

Mohani (name changed) expressed her anxiety as she was confused over what she needs to do. She has returned to village as she could not afford to stay in the city. She was thinking to take notes from her friends who are having online class at the moment but is fearful that so much course has already been missed that she may not be able to continue her studies. When expressing her anxiety to her parents, she was often told by her grandmother that, "Girls do not need to study much. Afterall, they are going to get married and go to husband's house. What will you do after studying?". She shared that she is often discouraged to continue her studies especially when she looks at the financial condition of her family. Further, Tiruneh (2020) rightly points out that, "Parents from rural localities may be reluctant to send their children back to school because they may prefer their children to continue to support them in farming and livestock herding."

Participants expressed their dissatisfaction over the facilitation provided by the school and some of them had made up their minds to discontinue their study if they cannot have access to any learning platforms. This is an issue which needs serious and immediate attention of the government, schools, agencies and organizations working in the educational sector. Depriving students and youths of education is not only a violation of their basic rights but it is also depriving them of their rights to access better employment opportunities, a better future and life. It has put at greater risk all the investment and efforts put by the government and organizations for increasing the enrollment and retention of students, decreasing dropout and enhancing the quality of public education. COVID-19 has put unprecedented and almost irreparable damage to the education system in Nepal. Buckler et

al., as cited in Dawadi et al. (2020) argue that 'the longer the schools are closed, the more drop-outs occur, the less likely they are to see themselves as learners. It becomes much harder (logistically and psychologically) to re-enroll and re-engage".

5.3.4 Fearful of the future

Youths in the study expressed uncertainty of their future and shared that they were likely to give up on their ambitions. With regular classes being halted and almost no facilitation from schools and colleges, it could be felt that youths were getting distracted from them engaging in any sort of learning. Many youths who had access to devices were engaged in playing online games. When asked why they were not engaged in learning even though they had internet facility, they simply replied that schools had not provided them with online classes or access to any learning materials. Some of them even said that, "I learnt to play online games more than anything else in this entire lockdown". Parents could be seen complaining of their children engaged in games for hours but not engaged in any learning.

Ramita (name changed) who is from a district in Terai shared that she wanted to become a nurse but was fearful that this dream would never come true. When asked why she thought so, she replied, "School have been closed for almost two months now. Even in the last year, we got to study only 3 months in school. I haven't learnt anything. After final exams, I want to try getting scholarship for nursing, I think that will not be possible as I haven't learnt anything last year and may be this year too will be the same". Many youths like Ramita and especially for marginalized community have high aspirations as they hope to live out a better life than their families have had to live, for some it is a constant struggle to move out of poverty and discrimination with the help of education. They are fearful that they will miss better opportunities due to their present condition of poverty, and irresponsible attitude of schools and local government towards their education.

Ramita further shared that when she is alone, she often compares her state with those youths who have access to resources and are from well-to-do families. She shared, "I am from a poor family. If my father had enough money, maybe he would have sent me to a school in city where online classes are going on. Sometimes I feel it is not for us to have dreams because every time we have dream they come crashing down. I feel it's a curse to be born in poverty." Ramita shared her anxiety and constant struggle with poverty and thinks that here future will be even more affected due to the present context of not having chance to study due to COVID-19.

Many youths deprived from learning are anxious about their future and fearful that their future would be affected. The pain and burden of these youths can only be lessened by helping them participate equitably and effectively in the learning process, closing the digital divide providing access to internet and technology and reigniting in the youths the hopes and aspirations for their future.

5.3.5 Widening digital divide and its implications

The government prepared guidelines of facilitation of learning in the scenario of COVID-19 has highlighted alternative ways of learning using various resources as available with the student and in the locality. However, when interviewing the participants, it was seen that due to the lack of resources such as digital devices like laptops, tablets and smartphones, students could not access the online classes that few schools were providing. At other times, they were found comparing themselves with students from cities or those with resources who were having regular online classes to some extent.

Ramila Tamang (name changed), who was studying in a community school in Kathmandu and staying with her local guardians mentioned that even though she was able to access online classes as she had been provided with internet facility by her guardians and a smartphone, almost three-fourth of her classmates had been unable to take the classes. Most of them did not have access to resources for online classes, and others had returned to their villages and were unable to take classes from there. She mentioned that if the government had been able to do something to provide them with the necessary resources, they would not have required to miss their classes and lessons. Further, she mentioned that this was increasing the risk of 'drop outs'.

Naina Khatun (name changed), from one of the Terai districts shared she and friends like her studying at grade 10 at the moment felt disadvantaged over those students form cities like Birgunj and Kathmandu where online classes are regular. She shared two basic problems for this discrimination. The first one was lack of resources due to poverty. She shared,

> "*We are unable to take online classes first of all because of our poverty. Being poor, our parents could not afford to send us to boarding schools in city areas where even during the pandemic they are having support from their school and teachers. Also, it is poverty due to which we are unable to have digital devices like smartphones. If I had a smartphone and internet, I too could study instead of this idleness. I know I have been rendered helpless because of marginalization due to poverty. This often makes me think why we have had to be poor?"*

Naina's question simply represents the inequality manifested by marginalization due to poverty. Comparison with her counterparts in cities has made her rethink of the poverty and social inequality, it can reinforce upon young students like her the feeling of inferiority and lack of dignity. She is fearful that this current situation is going to push her community back by several years. She was thoughtful to even share that, *"There were many changes in this country, but was there any social transformation? Why are young people in our community being punished lacking access to education?"*

Digital divide has already begun shaping the community into distinct sections, one with access to educational resource and the other with lack or almost no resources. This can have serious implications in the future of our society, and risks discrimination, even further marginalization and lack of opportunities for the really needy sections of the society.

Section VI: Key Findings and Recommendations

6.1 Key Findings

This study provides useful insight about the policies and practices of the government in facilitating access to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and how such policies have been implemented by schools, local governments and other responsible authorities. The experiences and views shared by the participants who were from marginalized communities and youths with disability help us understand their perception regarding learning through alternative channels, their challenges in accessing learning materials, hardships they are facing due to the pandemic and how they think they are being affected. This study also provides us a glance at the practices and situation of overall education system in Nepal due to the pandemic.

- Large number of schools and local governments seem to be lacking in following the guidelines provided by the Ministry for effective facilitation of learning during the pandemic.

- Many schools had failed to provide any learning facilitation to the students in the rural areas and in the Terai. Schools had not even informed the students of the classes through online or alternative mediums and in case where schools did provide online classes, students raised their concern of teachers often not taking classes on time and were irregular and absent.

- Most of the marginalized youths in the study lacked access to appropriate resources (ICT/ digital devices) for taking online classes. It was surprising that even though government had provided learning materials (audio-visuals) through TV and radio, and even asked local governments to coordinate regarding it, none of the participants in the study had accessed these resources through TV or radios.

- Lack of (quality) internet and appropriate device for learning was the main challenge cited by the participants in the study.

- It was disturbing to find that some of the participants in the study and their friends had been thinking about and almost decided for dropping out.

- Inability to access learning during the pandemic through any of the mediums coupled with financial hardship as many of their parents and they themselves have lost jobs were the main reasons behind choosing to drop out.

- Especially girls in some rural areas and marginalized community were being discouraged from continuing learning form their families owing to financial burden.

- Many youths who used to work and even support their families have lost employment and were seen anxious. Some were more worried about their jobs rather than their education.

- Youths with disability were disproportionately at a disadvantage regarding access to learning due to the pandemic. It was seen that they were not provided with disabled friendly learning materials and even felt being discriminated because of their disability.

- Some of the youths with disability in the study did share that with access to proper technology and a little know-how, they could engage effectively in the learning even during the pandemic.

- It is almost a fearful thought that many youths are at the risk of drop out, and has also increased the risk of washing away the valuable investment and efforts that government, educational institutions and organizations have made over the previous years to increase enrollment, retention and to enhance quality education in Nepal.

- This scenario has shown that we lack in terms of resources, knowledge and skills for making classes available online and lack of coordination among responsible authorities in delivering the programs effectively.

6.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study and analysis of the aforementioned educational polices formulated by the Nepal government for facilitation of learning through alternative channels, following recommendations are made.

6.2.1 Recommendations related to policies and practices of the government

- The policies seem to lack a dialogic dimension and adequate inputs and feedbacks from relevant stakeholders especially local educational stakeholders. Thus, additional feedback and incorporation of relevant suggestions is required in the policies.

- Policies relatively lack concrete actions in facilitation of youths/students with disability. It is eminent to address the challenges faced by learners with special needs through the policy documents and consultation with relevant stakeholders. The needs of disabled youths are different according to their specific disability and so such consultations should be inclusive.

- The guidelines need to clearly describe the timeline for execution of specific activities.

- The Student Learning Facilitation Guideline should provide a concrete solution or directions as to how the most disadvantaged learners i.e., those without access to any resources would be facilitated with.

- There should be a quick revision by the responsible authority regarding the effectiveness of categorization of students on the basis of their access to resources. From the interviews, it was seen that this categorization can likely deepen the digital divide and fuel existing social inequality. It is necessary to evaluate whether this plan has been effective or review of the policy is necessary.

- One of the basic challenges in the policies is related to monitoring and evaluation. There should be provision for effective monitoring and evaluation by the designated responsible authority in the policies so as to make the program effective.

- There should be an effective mechanism of keeping records or tracking the progress of student participation and learning outcome in the policy itself which can help to review the effectiveness of the guidelines.

- Even though facilitation through parental help and guidance is mentioned in the guideline, interviews in the study indicated that parents often were unable to help their children in learning or provide required facilitation. In such a case, the nature, role and responsibility of parent education should be mentioned in the policy. It should consider whether parents can really help their children or not and what should be done if parents cannot help their children.

- The policies specially designed to facilitate school students lack mechanisms on how practical classes would be operated for subjects such as science and computer science. Along with various learning portals and websites for accessing various audio-visual resources, arrangements for virtual labs or audio-visual resources related to practical classes also need to be provided.

- Mechanism for improved coordination between school/college and local governments should be developed.

- This study has identified that in order to be prepared to host learning through alternative channels in later times, it is eminent that a large scale survey be carried out on various dimensions such as access to learning materials and resources, effectiveness of learning through alternative channels, role of schools, teachers and parents in such facilitation and its effectiveness, exploring the perception of learners and the challenges they have and how such facilitation can be made effective.

- Local government should provide adequate training on digital literacy and online classes to teachers to equip them and enhance their skills for facilitating the classes effectively.

- Governments should take necessary steps to make sure that all the students are engaged in learning through at least one of the alternative channels as provided in the guidelines.

- Internet data packages should be made available for students in a subsidized rate or can be made available to community or locality at free of cost for accessing learning materials. It requires arrangement of necessary infrastructures as well.

- There should be necessary provision and arrangement for collection and usage of quality teaching learning materials which are locally prepared by teachers.

- Many youths are at the risk of drop out because of financial burden as a result of the pandemic. In such a case, additional investment is required for youths from marginalized community in terms of providing scholarships and learning materials such as books so as to encourage them to continue their studies.

- It may be possible and helpful to provide marginalized youths (those without any access to resources) with radios so that they can engage in learning through the audio programs aired by the local governments. If students have access to mobile phones, they too can use the FM radio for learning purposes. However, it should be noted that all students need to be provided the information on such programs effectively by the schools.

- Especially in case of grade 11 and 12 and university level students, it was found that there were no audio-visual materials prepared to facilitate them. It is necessary that audio-visual learning materials of various subjects be prepared and readily made available so that they can engage in learning too.

6.2.2 Recommendations for youth with disability

- Necessary learning materials should be made available for youths/ students with disability in the learning portal facilitated by CEHRD. At the moment, such learning materials which are available in the learning portal (website) of CEHRD which has been prepared with support of various NGOs are almost not helpful for students with disability.

- Teachers attending learners with disability must be trained for providing appropriate facilitation to the students. It is necessary to recognize the needs of the learners and be sensitive towards their needs.

- Youths with visual impairment need to be provided with basic knowledge and know-how regarding use of technology for learning through smartphones and laptops. Even during the

lockdown, organizations working in the sector can develop plans or programs to help visually impaired students learn how to use technology for studying.

- Facilitators attending deaf students need to know the sign language mandatorily. It should be mandatory arrangement for teachers even teaching in university level to use standard sign language so that students can learn the lessons effectively.

- Youths with disability and also marginalized youths are to be provided learning materials such as laptops and smartphones in concession or subsidized rates including access to internet facilities.

- Books in braille for visually impaired students need to be made available as soon as possible. There should be a mechanism to monitor if the books have been delivered to the students.

- Arrangements should be made so that leaning audio-visual materials prepared by the government can be appropriate for youths with disability as well. For example: in case of videos, such lessons need to be interpreted in sign language in the video itself so that the deaf students can also make use of these resources. NGOs working in this sector can provide necessary assistance for making the videos disabled friendly to facilitate the leaning process.

- Notices and circulars need to be published by schools and colleges such that it is machine readable so that visually impaired students can also understand the notices. Instead of photos, it is advisable to use word/pdf files for sending notes as well as notes to the students as they are machine readable.

6.2.3 Recommendations for schools and colleges

- All the schools should strictly follow the guidelines prepared by the government.

- It is necessary that schools and colleges would immediately maintain the records of students with access to various resources as directed by the government. It is understood that only when such data is available, learning modality can be effectively designed for the students with access to specific resources.

- Schools need to provide facilitation/ training to teachers immediately in terms of effectively operating online classes or through distance mode. This will be helpful for later emergency situations as well.

- All the schools/colleges need to have a well-organized plan as stated in the guidelines to facilitate students' learning. Further, while making or revising the plans, special attention should be given to marginalized youths or students without access to any of the resources for learning.

- One of the important and accessible tools for continuous facilitation is through telephone communication. Schools should have a mechanism through which teachers can regularly communicate with students, understand their situation and provide required guidance. Even where students are learning through TV or radios, such regular communication by the teachers can help understand how students are doing in their lessons and where they require additional support.

- Schools and colleges need to coordinate with the local government in order to facilitate the most disadvantaged students, those with no access to any resources for learning.

- Local governments should ensure and monitor that all the schools and colleges are providing facilitation to the students for learning, and advise on the modalities being used by the schools for such facilitation.

- In case where online classes are being organized, schools/colleges should organize regular parents, students, teacher meeting for making the facilitation even more effective.

- Local governments on the recommendation of the school/college need to make arrangements for helping the most disadvantaged learners so that everyone can engage in learning in some way.

- Schools need to provide the class routine to the students. Information should be effectively disseminated to the students in such matters. Principals and Head Teachers need to monitor, evaluate and make record of how online classes are taking place, and how teachers and students are performing in the online classes.

- Assignments need to be regularly assessed by teachers for helping students learn effectively.

- The door-to-door campaign which has been organized by schools in few areas need to be strengthened with necessary support from the local government.

- After the lockdown is eased, and during the time when schools are still closed physically, it is recommended that small group classes be organized in the local community in coordination of local government and schools for providing remedial classes.

- After the school reopens, students and parents need to be provided with psychological counselling encouraging them to return to schools which has also been mentioned in the framework formulated by the government and the responsibility of which has been given to SMCs.

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NATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATION NEPAL (NCE- NEPAL)

National Campaign for Education Nepal (NCE- Nepal) in UN ECOSOC special consultative status is a civil society movement with mandates to lobby and advocacy for ensuring quality education for all. The history of NCE-Nepal traced back in April 2003, after obtaining membership from the international network, Global Campaign for Education (GCE). As GCE Nepal network decided to broaden its spectrum on advocacy, all coalition members felt a need of it legal identity. As a result, NCE-Nepal was formally established on 2010 as civil society movement to ensure the right to equitable, inclusive quality education for all.

NCE-Nepal is a campaign for undertaking collective efforts and coordinating among individuals/organizations engaged in promoting the human rights to quality education in Nepal. It works as a watchdog to ensure everyone's rights to education and advocates for the same. It focuses on strategic interventions related to policy advocacy, networking, lobbying and campaigning at the district, regional, national and international levels. Currently, it has 409 member organizations including 48 General members and 361 affiliated members ranging from international and national non-government organizations, federation, education media organizations and teachers' community to grassroots institutions working in the field of education and child rights. Besides, it has district coalition in 30 districts covering 7 provinces of Nepal. NCE-Nepal is also a member of Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) and Global Campaign for Education (GCE). In addition to this it has recently registered as a member of Inter Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). Being a member of GCE and ASPBAE, NCE-Nepal has access to engage to debates on education issues at local, regional and international forums. It is one of the recognized CSO network to contribute in the national policy making process for education in Nepal as acknowledged by the Government.

Vision
Equitable inclusive quality public education for all in Nepal.

Mission
Lead the creative campaigning to hold the government accountable and to ensure right to quality public education in Nepal with civil society organizations, social justice movements progressive academia and marginalized communities.

Goal
To ensure equitable, inclusive, free, compulsory and quality education for children, youth and adult as their fundamental right to education in Nepal.

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