In Nepal, repeated school closures due to COVID-19 have likely led to learning loss especially for children from lower income families, living in rural areas and attending community schools, who often lacked access to alternative learning modalities and resources. Data was necessary to gauge learning levels of students and guide decisions to expedite learning recovery during school closures and reopening, particularly for young children at the foundational stage of learning. After analysis of the options, UNICEF opted for a phone-based survey because 95 per cent of Nepalese households have access to phones. A further advantage of this innovative approach was that enumerators did not have travel or have in-person contact with families during the pandemic, enabling safe, timely and cost-effective data collection. Since May 2020, UNICEF has been undertaking a large-scale phone-based survey called the Child and Family Tracker (CFT) with over 6,000 families, which included 14,000 children aged 0 to 18 years. The tracker assesses the overall wellbeing and safety of children during the pandemic, and it includes questions related to their education. At the height of the COVID-19 crisis, data from the CFT indicated that 52 per cent of children could not continue their learning; even those students who did continue, 68 per cent had limited support from or interaction with teachers.

The bimonthly survey also showed that pre-primary children were particularly hard hit and real-time data was needed to inform continuous policy and programme efforts for the youngest learners. UNICEF proposed a phone-based early childhood development (ECD) assessment—rooted in reports from parents rather than direct evaluation from teachers—to hone in on learning levels of children aged 2 to 4 years. The ECD Index (ECDI) 2030, which was already validated as a global indicator of SDG target 4.2.1, was selected as the most suitable instrument. In April 2021, UNICEF, together with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, conducted a pilot study in three municipalities, which confirmed that the phone-based ECDI 2030 assessment can collect the data at the same quality as the originally validated face-to-face ECDI assessment. After the successful
completion of the pilot, UNICEF conducted the telephonic survey in early August 2021, where mothers were the main respondents. Results from the survey are currently being analysed and finalised.

RESULTS

- CFT-ECDI survey reached 2,853 households with children aged 2 to 4 years. The data from the survey represents the national population of this age group, which is approximately 1,764,000 young children.

- Preliminary findings indicated that 81 per cent of children aged 2 to 4 years were developmentally on track in terms of health, learning and psychosocial well-being.

- UNICEF trained 25 enumerators on administering the phone-based assessment and adhering to data collection protocols such as securing a quiet and private space for the interviews. As part of data quality checks, UNICEF also collected data on administrative challenges in enumerators’ post-interview questionnaires for all 2,853 interviews.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Commitment is needed to overcome significant disparities in children’s development. Disparities observed in children’s development were similar to those prior to the pandemic: they were linked to household location and income, the caregiver’s education level and community versus private preschool attendance. Children who attended government sponsored early childhood education (ECE) and those who did not attend ECE had wider individual learning gaps and were at higher risk of being developmentally off track, compared to those who attended private ECE. Limited access to alternative learning modalities, underused low-tech solutions and less learning support by families and teachers during school closures have contributed to this gap. Particularly, the use of online classes was observed exclusively among children who attended private ECE.

- Drops in parental engagement must be addressed. Active early engagement by family members is positively and significantly associated with ECDI2030 scores. Alarming ly, the assessment revealed a plunge in parental engagement compared to pre-pandemic conditions: only 31 per cent of children aged 2 to 4 years currently receive adult stimulation at home compared to 73 per cent in 2019. This might be linked to parents’ increased stress levels and the de-prioritisation of early learning during the COVID-19 crisis. UNICEF has started a follow-up survey to get deeper insight into why parents are engaging less in the learning journey of their youngest children.

- Individual gaps should be tackled jointly by ECE teachers and parents. To address individual gaps in the classroom, teachers must adjust teaching and learning to each child’s developmental level, which can be done using formative assessment. However, given that government sponsored ECE programmes have large class sizes (24 students on average, as of 2019) and a high child-to-teacher ratio (17:1) as well as insufficient professional development for teachers (only 18 per cent are fully trained with one month in-service training), individualised teaching and learning in classrooms remains challenging. Thus, cooperation among ECE teachers and parents is paramount to meet the individual needs of these young learners.

NEXT STEPS

Upon the completion of the follow-up survey, UNICEF will develop user-friendly reports and disseminate findings to the government and partners to facilitate evidence-informed policy discussion. Furthermore, UNICEF is working on developing supplementary activities to support children and caregivers in reducing learning gaps identified in the survey.

Cost effectiveness: In 2021, UNICEF invested US$14,000 in the phone-based ECD assessment, gathering detailed data to improve learning outcomes for an estimated 1,764,000 children (822,000 girls) aged 2 to 4 years.