Sri Lanka
Case Study

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

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Foreword

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

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

In response, with support from the Global Partnership for Education, UNICEF and UNESCO joined forces with Mott MacDonald, Cambridge Education to carry out a situation analysis, primarily to generate analyses to inform strategic responses to the crisis going forward. While the extension and duration of the pandemic required to invest more time to produce the final analyses and reports, fortunately information had already been discussed through webinars and national conversations with Ministries of Education and other partners across large parts of the Asia Pacific region.
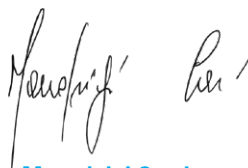
Furthermore, the reports continue to be of utmost relevance given subsequent waves of COVID-19 sweeping across the world in 2021 and very likely in 2022 as well. The task of learning from the crisis and how to mitigate its effects in education is on-going. More than one academic year has now been lost for many children. To ensure continuity of learning whilst schools are closed, the delivery of education is radically changing today through distance education: digital, blended or hybrid learning have become part of the new learning reality which all Governments, teachers and learners will have to adjust to.

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

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

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List of acronyms

CBO	Community-based organization
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
CPRP	Country Preparedness and Response Plan
CWD	Children with disabilities
ECD	Early childhood development
EMIS	Education Management Information System
FHH	Female-headed households
GBV	Gender-based violence
GDP	Gross domestic product
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
HRIS	Human Resource Information System
ICT	Information and communications technology
IPC	Infection prevention and control
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISA	In-Service Advisor
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoH	Ministry of Health
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NIE	National Institute of Education
NOCPCO	National Operations Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak
PDE	Provincial Department/s of Education
PER	Public Expenditure Review
PHM	Public health midwives
PTF	Presidential Task Force
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SDS	School Development Society
SEQI	School Education Quality Index
SIS	Student Information System
SOPs	Standard operating procedures
SPRP	Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan
UCB	Universal Child Benefit
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

Introduction

The effects of COVID-19 around the globe have been unanticipated and significant. This country case study was undertaken as part of the broader analysis initiated by UNICEF and UNESCO to provide a snapshot of the response of the education sector to the effects of COVID-19 across Asia. It considers the direct effects of school closures and reopening and identifies the initial impact that this may have had on learners, their families and the overall education system. In so doing, it aims to develop insights based on the variety of responses to the pandemic with a view to assessing their efficacy in Asia. It seeks an understanding of the contextual factors that may have supported or hindered learning, with particular attention on the most disadvantaged groups who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. For this, the analysis has the following objectives:

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

This is one of 14 country case studies from across the Asia-Pacific region. The overall study will include an overview of the situation in each of the three Asian sub-regions, as well as an overview of the region.

This case study on Sri Lanka involved a desk-based review of secondary data and eleven interviews and focus group discussions with the central and provincial Ministry of Education and Department of Education, Government officials and school teachers, students, and other community representatives from the Uva, Central and Eastern province. The case study focuses on lessons learned from successful coordination among and between various ministries and Government departments in the Government's response to COVID-19, seeks to understand where gaps exist, and makes recommendations for improved monitoring in the education sector. Full details of the stakeholder meetings and their participants can be found in the Annex.

Context

Sri Lanka has made impressive progress in expanding access to education and healthcare services. Despite the ravages of a 27-year-long civil war (1983 to 2009), the country maintains some of the highest literacy rates in South Asia. The health system is one of the best performing in the world, having achieved "good health at low cost".[1] Free health care has been available to every citizen in Sri Lanka since the 1930s; the country has successfully eliminated many diseases, including malaria, measles, rubella, and mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis.

Sri Lanka was extremely vulnerable to the spread of the virus because of its thriving tourism industry and large expatriate population. The first case was detected on 27 January 2020, and the first Sri Lankan national tested positive for COVID-19 on 10 March 2020.[2] In response, the Government of Sri Lanka rapidly introduced measures to curb the spread of the disease and imposed a strict island-wide lockdown on 16 March 2020. Infected patients were treated in secure environments, testing and contact-tracing efforts were quickly escalated, and awareness-raising campaigns on risk and prevention measures were implemented.[3]

As of 15 February 2021, there have been 76,428 confirmed cases and a total of 403 deaths. The trends over time show a steep increase in the number of new cases since the end of 2020. While the number of active cases and deaths remain low, there is concern that the number of new cases has increased so dramatically.

Effects of COVID-19 on the Education Sector

Access to and participation in learning

The global pandemic has caused large-scale disruption to the continuation of structured in-school education in Sri Lanka for approximately 4.2 million students and 235,000 teachers. The closing of schools for just one day causes a loss of about 25 million learning hours and 1.4 million teaching hours.[4] The extended closure of more than 10,000 schools, 736 Pirivenas[5] and over 100 private schools is likely to adversely impact work done towards the achievement of the SDG educational goals.

Numerous reports have demonstrated the impact of school closures on children's well-being and educational development. For instance, the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan led to an average of 14 weeks of school closures, putting affected children 1.5 to 2 years behind their peers.[6]

With the school year interrupted by multiple periods of school closure, access to and participation in quality learning has invariably decreased in Sri Lanka. Distance learning modalities cannot be uniformly applied across the nation as children have varying levels of access to laptops, mobile phones, TV, radio and the broader infrastructure that supports these systems. Hence, school closures have led to inequity in access to and participation in learning.

For teachers in Sri Lanka, there were similar struggles in delivering the curriculum through distance learning modalities. The teachers interviewed for this case study claimed to not have received any training on information and communications technology (ICT) or distance learning, yet quickly adapted to the alternative methods of teaching and learning. Teachers shared anecdotes of their own initiatives in tracking and supervising the learning of their students through, for example, mobile apps, and by recording videos of themselves teaching and sharing these with their students.

Safe operations

The Government of Sri Lanka took swift action to ensure the safety of its citizens. Two days after the first official confirmed death, the Government closed down all schools. The intention was to reopen schools in mid-April 2020. This was then postponed to July. Schools reopened the week of 6 July for grades sitting national exams – grades 5, 11 and 13. However, all schools were then closed again nationwide for two weeks due to a sharp rise in the number of COVID-19 cases, including one infected teacher (no transmission to other students/teachers were reported). Upper-secondary grades 11, 12 and 13 then resumed from 27 July onwards. All remaining grades, including pre-schools, reopened on 10 August 2020.

Initially, MoE planned to close all schools again on 9 October 2020 for the second-term holiday and to conduct the public exams. However, the schools were closed on 5 October 2020 due to a sharp increase in the number of COVID-19 cases. Schools reopened for grade 6 and above on 23 November 2020 (excluding Western Province and isolated areas) and closed for the third-term holidays on 23 December 2020. In 2021, schools reopened for grade 2 and above on 11 January (excluding the Western Province and isolated areas). The MoE had planned to open schools to grade 1 students in February 2021. At the time of writing, this had yet to be confirmed.

The phased approach to school reopenings was in line with the recommendations by the Global Framework for Reopening Schools (UNICEF, UNESCO, WB, WFP and UNHCR). At the same time, the changes made it difficult for schools, teachers, parents and supporting organizations to plan their response activities and they were forced to remain flexible.

Health, well-being, and protection

Globally, COVID-19 continues to have a severe effect on the most vulnerable people in terms of their health, well-being and protection. In Sri Lanka's COVID-19 Country Preparedness and Response Plan 2020, children, people with disabilities and women were identified as vulnerable and in need of special support.

The Ministry of Education has collected only limited data (especially among students) with which to analyze the real impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and design targeted interventions to support vulnerable groups. Some principals and teachers interviewed for this case study shared their experiences of reaching out to children with disabilities, and girls in remote villages. However, the education monitoring systems do not currently provide such standardized information at a national level.

Finances

The COVID-19 pandemic has been labelled as the 'worst economic shock in recent history' by economists. A KPMG report suggested the economic impact from COVID-19 could be unlike any other Sri Lanka has faced, with the economy contracting due to many sectors being at a standstill. Inflation is expected to have averaged 5 per cent in 2020, an increase from 4.3 per cent in 2019, driven by high food prices and supply chain disruption.[7] Tourism is a major contributor to the economy. During the first quarter of 2020, tourist arrivals fell to below 30 per cent.[8] As airports closed and travel was restricted between districts, both domestic and foreign tourism demand has been virtually zero.

According to a UNICEF study, urban households have seen a 37 per cent decrease in household income, as compared with a decrease of 30 per cent in rural households and a decrease of 23 per cent on tea estates, which is likely due to the fact that while most of the population reside in rural areas, most of the services and manufacturing-related work is based in urban areas hit hardest by the pandemic.[9]

This economic contraction will directly and indirectly affect schoolchildren, their education, health and well-being, as parents will have to make difficult choices in light of reduced incomes.

Responses to COVID-19

Sri Lanka's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been swift, decisive, and coordinated, using a whole-of-society approach. This participatory approach included multi-sectoral ministerial coordination at all levels of governance, tasked specifically to respond to the pandemic. It had strong leadership in the Government with technical guidance from the Ministry of Health (MoH) and Indigenous Medical Services and the World Health Organization.

At the central and local level, cross-sectoral committees were formed to respond to the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector. The Ministry of Education provided guidelines and protocols around the COVID-19 response, with local governments being responsible for supporting, planning, and implementing their local response. These guidelines were designed to protect the health of the people of Sri Lanka and minimize the spread of the virus.

Access to and participation in learning

During school closures, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Provincial Departments of Education (PDE) at national and subnational levels, attempted to provide continuous education for students in the following ways:

- The MoE, in partnership with internet service providers, activated its web-based learning platform, e-thaksalawa, which provides access to a range of content for grades 1 to 13 – textbooks, syllabus, teacher instruction manuals, subject-related educational software, revision question papers, supplementary reading material, etc. These lessons were made available in Sinhala, Tamil and English.
- Access to e-thaksalawa was made free-of-charge through any telephone network to encourage access by all students.
- Private internet service providers, like STL, Lanka Bell, Hutch, Mobiltel, Dialog and others, are providing special e-learning student data packages allowing children to study at home.
- Two public television channels were dedicated to airing educational programmes- Channel Eye and Nethra TV – in Tamil and Sinhala for grades 11,13 and 15.
- Realizing that not all students in Uva province would have access to the internet, a local government-supported radio channel broadcast subject lessons for students in exam grades, and five newspapers were circulated especially for them.
- In Central Province, home-based learning packages were delivered by schools for students of grades 6 to 11, which was then replicated by MoE.
- Understanding the specific educational needs of children in early-primary, the Ministry of Education collaborated with UNICEF to distribute study packs for grades 1 and 2. While recognizing that the optimal modes of distance learning are different for different age groups was important, further exploration into what learning methods and content works best is needed.

Teachers

As shared during stakeholder consultations, teachers attempted to understand the needs of their students, ascertain who was being left out, and how best to reach everyone through customized distance-learning modalities.

Mobile applications like WhatsApp and Viber were also used by teachers to keep in constant communication with their students, other teachers and the school management, given the fluid nature of planning.

When asked if teachers received any training on distance learning modalities, it was widely agreed that due to the sudden nature of the school closures, most schools did not have time to train teachers and ensure they had adequate capabilities.

Despite this lack of structured support, teachers demonstrated an ability to quickly adopt technology-based teaching solutions, develop innovative ways to reach students and a commitment to, and passion for, their profession.

Impact on attendance

According to MoE officials interviewed in October 2020, there was no significant reduction in student numbers reported by the provinces after schools reopened in August 2020. Attendance rates were almost at pre-COVID-19 levels. This was supported by daily attendance records collected by UNICEF in the four provinces in which it provides educational support – Uva, Central, Northern and Eastern. The maintenance of student numbers is assumed to be a result of low community transmission and the importance of education – especially for girls – among parents.[10]

However, attendance monitoring from the four UNICEF-supported provinces in the weeks after schools reopened for the second time on 23 November 2020, showed a very different picture. Attendance rates of both students and teachers were much lower than pre-COVID-19 times. The main reason for this decrease, according to the UNICEF attendance monitoring reports, was growing fears of the increased spread of the virus due to the prevalence of community transmission (which was not the case previously).

Impact on learning outcomes

With the uncertainty caused by not knowing when schools would reopen and for how long, it has been difficult for schools and provincial officers to gather data on the quality and effectiveness of the distance learning materials across different grades. Considering the large variations in the type of distance learning modes used by students, the number of learning hours they could dedicate within a day, the type of support they received from their parents and teachers, as well as the quality of learning materials developed at the provincial levels, learning gaps between pupils of the same grade are extremely likely.

Initially, in the absence of national guidelines and interventions to support children impacted by school closures, provincial ministries took it upon themselves to respond. In Central and Uva province, MoE with the support of UNICEF, conducted diagnostic tests with students in grades 1 to 4 after the first long closure of schools. Based on the findings, the curriculum was reorganized to prioritize competencies, with associated lesson plans developed, in line with the multi-level teaching pedagogy to help children catch up.

Building on the experiences of the Central and Uva provinces, UNICEF is supporting the Ministry of Education to scale up this initiative as a national strategy for learning recovery. Currently, national strategies and guidelines are being developed based on the successful interventions in Uva and Central province. Nationally standardized data on the learning levels of children are being collected, on the basis of which learning recovery and remedial education plans will be implemented across Sri Lanka.

Safe operations

From the outset, the MoE was very clear that before schools could be reopened, safe and healthy environments should be established, with measures taken to satisfy MoH standards. Safe school reopening manuals and checklists were developed to guide schools on how to limit exposure to the virus and reduce the chance of transmission in schools.

A central aspect of the guidance was behaviour change communication to the school communities; to engage parents, leaders, alumni and others in day-to-day activities and spread awareness of health and well-being needs over the longer term. The Ministry of Education, Health Promotion Bureau of the MoH and UNICEF launched the 'COVID-19: New Lessons for the New Term' media campaign to spread awareness around safe school reopening practices for schools, children and parents.

A consensus among the participants of the stakeholder consultations for this case study was that all decisions made by the Ministry of Education were guided by the Ministry of Health's technical expertise and the scientific/health advice of medical specialists/institutions. Substantive consultations with provincial authorities (especially the provincial education authorities) allowed the operationalization of school reopenings in each province according to local needs and realities.

Health, well-being and protection

Recognizing that the process of sudden school closures and reopenings, along with other stress factors caused by the pandemic, could cause increased anxiety among children of all ages, the Government specifically addressed mental health issues in its guidelines and planned for safe school reopenings. The Instructional Manual of Preparedness of schools and other educational institutions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, published in May 2020, gave clear guidance on how to identify mental stress in children and meet psychosocial needs. Other action taken to support health and well-being included: health promotion, school meal replacement, school medical inspection, and mental health support.

Lessons learned from successful Government coordination

At the time of developing this case study, Sri Lanka was widely seen as a success story in South Asia with regards to the containment of COVID-19. The effective management of the response also led to Sri Lanka being the first country in South Asia to have safely reopened all schools and all grades nationally (for the first time in August 2020). A key factor of this success was the efficient coordination among relevant actors and institutions, specifically that the response was driven by (i) science and evidence, (ii) a participatory, whole-of-government approach to operationalizing the response plan; and, (iii) building trust between government and citizens through strong communications.

While national decisions, including setting the school reopening dates and the national infection prevention and control (IPC) standards/guidelines, etc., were made at the central level, their operationalization was delegated to the local (provincial) level.

The coordinated response to COVID-19 in the education sector had demonstrable positive outcomes that, if implemented elsewhere, could benefit other countries in the region, notably: (i) the collaborated response put the health, safety and well-being of students at the centre; (ii) early myths were rapidly dispelled, and better coordination and leadership by MoE led to the clear understanding of risks related to schools; (iii) the development of clear, strong, and actionable protocols led to robust institutional trust among parents and community members during school closures and their reopening; (iv) coordination led to efficiency within the wider system by reducing

duplication and repetition, enabling the timely sharing of key information, resources, which amplified the impact of Government efforts; (v) the coordination effort led to the breakdown of silos within which Government departments and ministries used to operate.

Challenges of education sector monitoring

Even prior to the pandemic, monitoring and evaluation was in need of improvement, with little standardization in how data was collected, analysed and used for decision making. From national and provincial-level stakeholder consultations, it can be surmised that monitoring within the education sector was one of the weakest aspects of the education response. The key shortcomings were as follows:

- Burden of gathering information on children's access and participation levels during school closure fell mainly upon teachers and zonal-level officers. This was not done systematically or consolidated and analysed to inform decision making. This is, however, a larger systemic issue, as schools and zonal officers were not equipped with standardised mechanisms to monitor student attendance before the pandemic.
- Weak processes to assess the capabilities of teachers with regards to distance learning and support.
- No ongoing and systematic information collected on the quality of distance learning materials.
- No formative assessments took place during school closures to assess how students were learning, if at all.
- No assessment of children's welfare and mental health while schools were closed, or how they coped with returning to school after a long period of self-learning.
- Limited data collected specifically on how marginalized children – children with disabilities, children with no access to distance learning materials, living in remote areas, etc. – were coping after schools were closed.
- Weak systems to collect real-time attendance rates for teachers and students across the country and present a consolidated picture, the analysis of which would shed light on the impact of the COVID-19 education sector response plan on enrollment and dropout rates and what solutions are needed to address any negative trends.
- Incomplete and weak education information management and human resource management systems that do not provide Government officials, schools, teachers and parents with the data needed to make meaningful decisions.

Without strong continuous monitoring systems in place, the education sector cannot be agile and quick to adapt and find solutions to the problems raised by the pandemic. Decision-makers remain partially unaware of the extent to which the education sector has been impacted, invariably leaving some schools, teachers and students unsupported. Having a detailed knowledge of the impact of the shock through the use of real-time and reliable data also allows decision-makers to adequately invest in the system's recovery.

Recommendations to build back better

Recommendation 1: Evaluate the COVID-19 response

While the Government of Sri Lanka efficiently managed the school closure and safe reopening process, little is yet known about the impact of this process on the learning outcomes and development of school-going children. Even as individual provinces are using their own initiative to gather this information, a large-scale national evaluation needs to be conducted to inform policymaking in the short term and build resilience over the longer term. The following is needed for more effective evaluative capacity:

- Evaluate the quality of distance learning materials that were used for all grades through all mediums, including radio, TV, printed and online modalities. Include feedback from content creators, students (with varying experiences such as – urban and rural contexts, children with disabilities, those with limited support at home, etc.), teachers, and parents (especially of younger children who could not self-learn).
- Conduct a capacity needs assessment of teachers to support distance or blended learning through the use of technology to address the digital divide among teachers.
- Assess students at all levels to understand the degree of learning loss, paying particular attention to those who are disadvantaged (e.g., children with disabilities, ethnic minority students, students from migrant families, those living in poverty).
- Develop targeted remedial education interventions to allow children who might have lost critical learning hours to catch up in the fastest and most cost-effective manner.

Recommendation 2: Improving monitoring and data collection systems

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the need for real-time monitoring in order to track the progress and relative effectiveness of the response, and has shown that the existing systems, routines and processes in Sri Lanka are insufficient to manage the following highlighted issues:

- **Attendance:** Systematically track absenteeism as a way to detect and prevent dropout in a standardized way across all public schools in the country.
- **Learning:** The Sri Lankan education sector must regularly measure, monitor, record and analyse learning to assess learning loss and develop a plan for adapted remedial strategies that will cater to the most vulnerable.
- **Infrastructure development and expenditure tracking:** WASH in Schools and infection prevention and control (IPC) are the immediate priorities, but there are other standard operating procedures (SOPs) in school which require support, resources, and the tracking of their implementation. Such tracking – including that of the capital budget and additional funds disbursed for the response – are essential for course corrections and to assigning additional support where needed.

It is recommended that the above three issues are addressed first, and that the monitoring of attendance and learning levels should be prioritized in the ongoing education reform process in Sri Lanka. The overall strengthening of data systems should be sequenced to respond to immediate needs first, with the long-term goal of integrating data systems in the future.

Recommendation 3: Governance of education monitoring and data

Setting up procedures for the governance of data and tracking is imperative to accountability in decision making, ensuring responsibility in course corrections and adapting programmes in light of new evidence.

The education monitoring reform process must include the following in terms of governance:

- Clear roles and responsibilities with regards to data collection, analysis and dissemination
- Ensure the safe, ethical and effective management of personal and non-personal data, in line with data responsibility best practice[11]
- Defined mechanisms for processes, analysing and reporting on the data collected
- Periodic training for all stakeholders from the monitoring to the decision-making process
- Reviewing these and other governance processes on a regular basis to ensure efficiency within the system.

Country fact sheet

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

DIMENSION	INDICATOR/QUESTION	INFORMATION		
Epidemiology	Date of first confirmed case	27 January 2020		
	Date of first confirmed death	11 March 2020		
	COVID-19 cases and deaths over time	76,428 cases and 403 deaths[12]		
	Details about the pandemic and Government responses and supports	Government of Sri Lanka rapidly introduced measures to curb the spread of the disease and imposed a strict island-wide lockdown on 16 March 2020. Infected patients were treated in secure environments, testing and contact-tracing efforts were quickly escalated, and awareness-raising campaigns on risk and prevention measures were implemented.[13] As of early December 2020, there have been a total of 15,723 cases, 48 deaths, 11,031 recovered and discharged, 501 suspected and hospitalized and no new cases.		
School Closure	Were schools closed, partially or fully	All schools and education institutions closed fully.		
	Date of school closures	13 March 2020		
	Date of school reopening	In a phased manner: • Grades 11, 12, 13 opened on 27 July 2020 • All other grades opened on 10 August 2020 All schools were reopened from 10 August 2020, and the MoE planned to close all the schools again on 9 October 2020 for the second-term holiday and to conduct the public exams. However, the schools were closed on 5 October 2020, one week earlier than the original date, due to a sharp increase in COVID-19 transmission. The Government announced that all schools would be reopened on 9 November 2020 (for all grades except for primary) and this was later postponed by two weeks with the increase of COVID-19 cases in several parts of the country. Accordingly, schools were reopened for grade 6 and above on 23 November 2020 (excluding the Western Province and isolated areas) and closed for the third-term holidays on 23 December 2020. In 2021, schools reopened for grade 2 and above on 11 January (excluding the Western Province and isolated areas). The MoE has planned to call the grade 1 students to schools in February 2021. This is yet to be confirmed[14].		
	Have schools reopened fully or partially	Partially		
	What phase is the country currently? Phase 1, 2 or 3 and is this nationally or regionally?	Sri Lanka is currently in phase 3 across the country.		
Key Vulnerable Groups	Key vulnerable groups affected by the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector	Disabled children; those at risk of child labour; those who cannot access remote learning; children on estate farms; children from female-headed households; children in urban settlements.		
Education System Structure	Brief description of the structure of the education system – federal or centralized	Sri Lanka has a federal education structure with the central Government and provincial councils sharing the management and oversight responsibilities.		
Education Data[15]		Pre-primary	Primary	Secondary
	Number of learners	464,189	1,672,350	1,968,611
	Total number of teachers	247,334 (total): 183,024 (female) and 64,310 (male)		
	Number of education institutions	3,890 (only primary)	5,268 (primary & secondary)	1,017 (only secondary)
Pre-COVID-19[16] progress towards SDG4 indicators	Out of school rate	Out of School Children (OOSC) in primary = 0.9 per cent OOSC in secondary = 5.6 per cent		
	Completion rate	Lower-secondary completion rate = 95 per cent		
	Minimum reading proficiency rate	No data available		

01

Introduction

1.1 Background

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic makes it unique in modern times, affecting the whole world with the twin shocks of a health emergency and an economic recession. This will lead to long-term costs on human capital accumulation, development prospects and welfare. The pandemic, though global, has disproportionally affected the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society.

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

Asia, with its huge population and many overcrowded cities, is potentially very vulnerable to COVID-19, which spreads through close contact with infected people. The contexts within which the people of South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia, are coping with the virus are vastly different, with a disparity in living conditions and varying degrees of access to and quality of essential services such as health and education. Across the continent, there is vast inequality between the rich and poor and, therefore, different levels of resilience to the shocks that this disease has brought, putting the poor at long-term risk that reaches far beyond contracting the virus. This region regularly suffers from shocks which lead to localized learning interruptions. For example, during the pandemic, Bangladesh and India were in the path of a cyclone, and there have been recent floods across the continent which have threatened communities, and resulting in a double shock.

This Situation Analysis has been undertaken as part of the broader analysis initiated by UNICEF and UNESCO to provide a snapshot of the response of the education sector to the effects of COVID-19 across Asia. It considers the direct effects of school closures and reopening and identifies the initial impact that this may have on learners, their families and the overall education system. In so doing, it aims to develop insights based on the variety of responses to the pandemic with a view to assessing their efficacy in Asia. It seeks an understanding of the contextual factors that may have supported or hindered learning, with particular attention on the most disadvantaged groups who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. For this, the analysis has the following objectives:

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- To examine the financial and policy implications of progress towards achieving SDG4-Education 2030; and
- To identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors, which can be shared with other countries.

The Situation Analysis focuses on countries across Asia, looking at how teachers, learners, and parents have been impacted by, and education systems have responded to, the threat of COVID-19. It identifies examples of effective country approaches which could be replicated or adapted for use in other countries. Following the development of the case studies (including this Sri Lanka situation analysis), the overall study will include an overview of the situation in each of the three Asian sub-regions, as well as an overview of the region.

1.2 Methodology

This case study is part of a broader study into the impact of COVID-19 across Asia. The case studies have been supported by the UNICEF and UNESCO country offices which have provided relevant information and assisted the researchers in contacting relevant officials to collect country-specific documents, grey literature and data.

In addition to a literature review, each case study also involved interviews with key stakeholders (listed in Annex). This provided an opportunity to hear more about the challenges faced and the strategies developed by people at the coalface of the response, and provided a space for discussion and debate on lessons learned and what still needs to be done in response to the pandemic. For this case study, the interviews were held in October 2020, and reflect the experience of the stakeholders up to that period. The situation is likely to have evolved since then.

1.3 Structure of the case study

The case studies are divided into four sections. After this introduction and country fact sheet, Chapter 2 discusses the effects of COVID-19 on the education system against four dimensions (see Figure 2) and the responses to the effects by the education sector are set out against the three phases of school reopening (see Figure 1), depending on the specific context of each case study country. Chapter 3 provides a deep dive into a particular theme, which was identified by the UNICEF and UNESCO country teams. For the Sri Lanka case study, the deep dive has a dual focus:

1. The lessons learned from the successful coordination of the COVID-19 response between different Government ministries and departments, and

2. The identification of gaps and formulation of recommendations for improved monitoring and data collection within the education sector.

The research and analysis is based on eleven (individual and group) stakeholder meetings and the desk study.

Finally, Chapter 4 provides specific recommendations based on the lessons learned and looks to the future in an effort to build back better and increase the resilience of the Sri Lankan education system to future shocks.

FIGURE 1 | THREE PHASES OF SCHOOL REOPENING

1 Prior to reopening
2 Part of the reopening process
3 With schools reopened
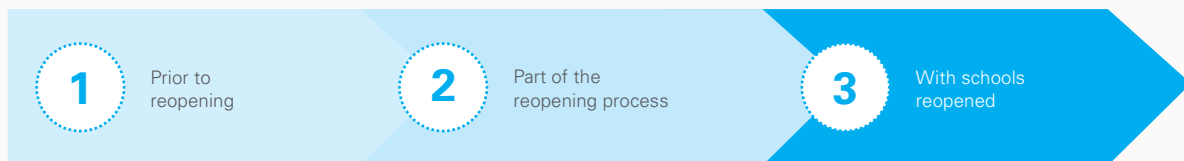
FIGURE 2 | FOUR DIMENSIONS OF ANALYSIS OF EFFECTS

Access to and participation in learning

Health, well-being and protection

Safe operations

Finances

02

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

Universal access to primary education has been achieved and the net enrollment rate for secondary education (84 per cent in 2014) is higher than the average of lower-middle-income countries (62 per cent in 2018) and upper-middle-income countries (79 per cent in 2018).

Sri Lanka has made impressive progress in expanding access to education and healthcare services. Despite the ravages of a 27-year-long civil war (1983 to 2009), the country maintains some of the highest literacy rates in South Asia. Universal access to primary education has been achieved and the net enrollment rate for secondary education (84 per cent in 2014) is higher than the average of lower-middle-income countries (62 per cent in 2018) and upper-middle-income countries (79 per cent in 2018).[17] This high enrollment performance is due to a combination of demand and supply-side policies. Demand for education is stimulated through a policy of free education in government schools, free textbooks from grades 1-11, and school uniforms for children from grade 1 to grade 13. On the supply side, the country has a complete network of public schools covering all towns and villages.[18]

Sri Lanka's health system is one of the best performing in the world, having achieved "good health at low cost".[19] Free healthcare for every citizen has been available in Sri Lanka since the 1930s; the country has successfully eliminated many diseases, including malaria, measles, rubella, and mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis; and has already achieved mortality rates that are less than half the 2030 SDG targets[20]- maternal (36 per 100,000 live births), under-five (6 per 1,000 live births) and neonatal (4 per 1,000 live births).

Sri Lanka was extremely vulnerable to the spread of the virus because of its thriving tourism industry and large expatriate population. The first case was detected on 27 January 2020, and the first Sri Lankan national tested positive for COVID-19 on 10 March 2020.[21] In response, the government of Sri Lanka rapidly introduced measures to curb the spread of the disease and imposed a strict island-wide lockdown on 16 March 2020. Infected patients were treated in secure environments, testing and contact-tracing efforts were quickly escalated, and awareness-raising campaigns on risk and prevention measures were implemented.[22] Figure 3 shows the situation as of 16 February 2021.[23]

FIGURE 3 | COVID-19 CASES AS OF 16 FEBRUARY 2021

| **76,423** Confirmed cases | **6,614** Active cases | **774** New cases | **69,411** Recovered | **403** Deaths |

2.1 Effects of COVID-19 against four dimensions

This chapter looks at how COVID-19 has affected Sri Lanka's education sector, and the responses that have been developed to mitigate these effects.

Access to and participation in learning

The global pandemic has caused large-scale disruption to the continuation of structured in-school education in Sri Lanka for approximately 4.2 million students and 235,000 teachers. The closing of schools for just one day causes a loss of about 25 million learning hours and 1.4 million teaching hours.[24] The long closure of more than 10,000 schools, 736 Pirivenas[25] and over 100 private schools is likely to adversely affect the ultimate achievement of the SDG educational goals.

Experience from other emergencies such as the Ebola crisis and the earthquake in Nepal teaches us that school closures in the long term can have adverse impacts on the number of school dropouts, children's attainment of age-appropriate learning competencies and an increased tendency for child abuse and neglect. In the Sri Lankan context, the pandemic and the subsequent school closures are likely to have severe effects on the most vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, those in the plantation sector, children of female-headed households, and those living in urban settlements.[26]

Over 85 per cent of Sri Lanka's early childhood development (ECD) centres are privately owned with no government assistance. There is limited regulation on these ECD centres, and a high risk of temporary or permanent shut down due to COVID-19.[27] Many young children who remain at home do not get the play and early learning support they need for healthy development. Lack of childcare and early education options also leaves many parents, particularly mothers working in the informal sector, with no choice but to bring their young children to work.[28]

According to the teachers interviewed through online consultations for this case study, the government continued to pay their salaries throughout the pandemic. This made teachers feel valued and incentivized them to continue supporting children and schools through lockdown to reopening. The teachers interviewed for this case study claimed to not have received any training on ICT or distance learning, yet quickly adapted to the alternative methods of teaching and learning. Teachers shared anecdotes of their own initiatives in tracking and supervising the learning of their students through, for example, mobile apps, and by recording videos of themselves teaching and sharing these with their students.

Safe operations

The government of Sri Lanka took swift action to ensure the safety of its citizens. Two days after the first official confirmed death, the government closed down all schools. The intention was to reopen schools in mid-April. This was then postponed to July 2020. Schools reopened the week of 6 July for grades that would be sitting national exams – grades 5, 11 and 13. However, all schools were then closed again nationwide for two weeks due to a sharp rise in the number of COVID-19 cases, including one infected teacher (no transmission to other students/teachers were reported). Upper-secondary grades 11, 12 and 13 then resumed from 27 July onwards. All remaining grades, including preschools, reopened on 10 August.

Initially, MoE planned to close all the schools again on 9 October 2020 for the second-term holiday and to conduct the public exams. However, the schools were closed on 5 October 2020 due to a sharp increase in the number of COVID-19 cases. Schools reopened for grade 6 and above on 23 November 2020 (excluding Western Province and isolated areas) and closed for the third-term holidays on 23 December 2020. In 2021, schools reopened for grade 2 and above on 11 January (excluding Western Province and isolated areas). The MoE had planned to open schools to grade 1 students in February 2021. At the time of writing, this had yet to be confirmed.

The phased approach to school reopenings was in line with the recommendations by the Global Framework for Reopening Schools (UNICEF, UNESCO, WB, WFP and UNHCR). At the same time, the changes made it difficult for schools, teachers, parents and supporting organizations to plan their response activities, and they were forced to remain flexible.

According to a survey conducted in June 2020, 77 per cent of the children (aged 0-19 years) polled were ready to go back to school and 80 per cent were aware of the required protective actions needed to take when they returned to school.[29]

Health, well-being and protection

Globally, COVID-19 continues to have a severe effect on the most vulnerable people in terms of their health, well-being and protection. This has been magnified in South Asian countries where marginalized groups exist on the brink of poverty and exclusion from basic services. In relation to Sri Lanka's COVID-19 Country Preparedness and Response Plan 2020, the following groups were identified as vulnerable and in need of special support:

Children in quarantine centres, institutions, estates (tea, rubber, etc.), and at home due to the closure of schools, particularly in poor urban settings, are all at risk of COVID-19 but also face increased protection risks including violence, abuse and child labour.

During the early stages of the COVID-19 response planning, child protection services were not identified as an essential service. Access to these services was even more challenging during this period, given the restriction of movement. As a result, increased rates of violence, sexual abuse and exploitation of women and children were reported within the first week of the island-wide curfew.[30] Through the advocacy of UNICEF, child protection was eventually approved as an essential service.

Students in remote, rural and in disadvantaged communities were disproportionally affected by school closures as they rely on several services provided by the school, such as school meals, nutritional screening, immunization, deworming, and mental health clinics.

People with disabilities experienced an increased level of insecurity and felt even more socially isolated. Some found it difficult to adhere to the social distance precautions given the need for caregivers to provide support for personal hygiene, etc. Information about social distancing may not have been provided in a way that was accessible to people with disabilities (such as the blind, hearing-impaired, etc.). Their physical and mental health needs may have been unmet, or they may have been more at risk of contracting the virus by missing the information needed to reduce the risk of infection. According to a rapid impact assessment conducted by World Vision, only 58 per cent of persons with disabilities claimed to have access to health and prevention awareness information.[31]

Women in general are facing an increased burden to provide unpaid care due to school closures, overwhelmed health systems and the increased needs of older people. Sri Lanka has a particular challenge due to the high proportion of female-headed households (FHH) in the country that face multiple challenges in providing for and managing families during the pandemic. The structural discrimination that FHH experienced pre-COVID-19 has become more evident during this period. At the same time, the financial strains faced by many families and the inability to access support services, is placing women at increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV), including domestic violence. The COVID-19 restrictions have increased obstacles to reporting incidents and seeking appropriate medical treatment or other GBV response support.

Movement restriction and already-underfunded services have made it even more difficult for Women Development Officers, Probation Officers and public health midwives to support women and girls who are at risk of GBV.

There is limited data collected by the Ministry of Education to analyse the real impact on vulnerable groups, especially among students, that would help design targeted interventions to support them. Some principals and teachers interviewed for this case study shared their experiences of reaching out to some children with disabilities and girls in remote villages. However, the education monitoring systems do not currently provide such standardized information at a national level.

Finances

The COVID-19 pandemic has been labelled as the 'worst economic shock in recent history' by economists. A KPMG report suggested the economic impact from COVID-19 could be unlike any other Sri Lanka has faced, with the economy contracting due to many sectors being at a standstill. Inflation is expected to have averaged 5 per cent in 2020, an increase from 4.3 per cent in 2019 driven by high food prices and supply chain disruptions.[32] Tourism is a major contributor to the economy. During the first quarter of 2020, tourist arrivals fell to below 30 per cent.[33] As airports closed and travel was restricted between districts, both domestic and foreign tourism demand has been virtually zero.

According to a UNICEF study, urban households have seen a 37 per cent decrease in household income, as compared with a decrease of 30 per cent in rural households and a decrease of 23 per cent on tea estates, which is likely due to the fact that while most of the population reside in rural areas, most of the services and manufacturing-related work is based in urban areas hit hardest by the pandemic (Figure 4).[34]

FIGURE 4 | PROJECTED DECREASE IN HOUSEHOLD INCOME DUE TO COVID-19
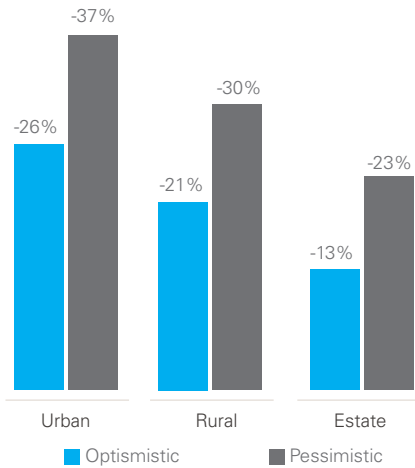
While the real impact of COVID-19 on the education sector financing is unclear at the time of writing, it is likely that the decline in household income will have a significant impact on parents' ability to pay for their children's schooling. This, along with a likely increase in negative coping strategies, could lead to an increase in child labour to make up for the loss of income, and a subsequent increase in the number of out-of-school children. Financial stress at home will also affect the mental well-being and health of children, making continuing their education (at a distance or in school) even more challenging.

The UNICEF study also shows that while the health crisis has hit the elderly population especially hard, the economic impact is more substantial for the young generation[35] (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5 | PROJECTED PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY AGE
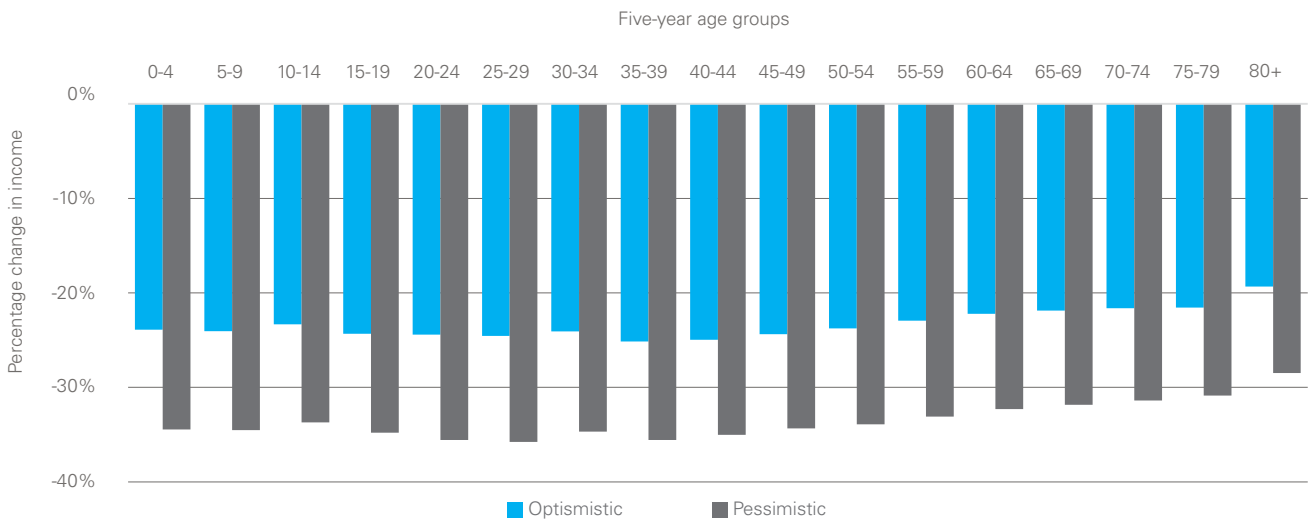
The government has allocated up to 0.1 per cent of GDP for containment measures. The President has announced cash payments totalling around 0.25 per cent of GDP for vulnerable groups and established a Task Force on Economic Revival and Poverty Eradication.[36]

Government expenditure on education as a per cent of GDP has been declining since 2016 from 3.4 per cent to 2.1 per cent in 2018 (the global average is around 4 per cent). Secondary education is allocated the largest portion of the budget (Table 1). [37] While this funding is low, it is supplemented by high household contributions for transport, food and other school materials.[38] Private tuition is also widespread, especially among students who are preparing to pass the state O-level and A-level exams. This often supplements teacher salaries and is an extra burden on household incomes.[39]

TABLE 1 | GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

EXPENDITURES	YEAR	%
Expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure (%)	2018	11.3
Expenditure on pre-primary as % of government expenditure on education (%)	2018	0.0
Expenditure on primary as % of government expenditure on education (%)	2018	29.9
Expenditure on secondary as % of government expenditure on education (%)	2018	45.7
Expenditure on tertiary as % of government expenditure on education (%)	2018	20.7
Government expenditure on education as % of GDP (%)	2018	2.1

According to an interview with a senior ministry of education official, all teachers continued to be paid their full salaries when schools were closed in Sri Lanka. Job security for teachers in Sri Lanka indicates the government's commitment to education, valuing teachers as a critical service, and protecting their well-being.

While the education budget had no allocated budget line for emergency response, the policy and planning department of the MoE designed a comprehensive plan for COVID-19. This included the re-programming of some development-partner funding (e.g., World bank General Education and Modernisation Project) plus UNICEF support to deliver Water Sanitation and Hygiene facilities and Infection Prevention and Control items for schools. As equitable access for all children was a particular government concern, the MoE is also providing grants to deprived schools which has allowed them to add additional facilities to ensure reopening.

2.2 Education sector response to COVID-19 and supported continuity of learning

Sri Lanka's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been swift, decisive, and coordinated, using the whole-of-society approach. This participatory approach included multi-sectoral ministerial coordination at all levels of governance, with specific responsibilities to respond to the pandemic. It was under the strong leadership of the government with technical guidance from the Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services and the World Health Organization. The government of Sri Lanka took swift action to ensure the safety of its citizens. The school closure and reopening schedule has been described in 2.1.

At the central and local level, cross-sectoral committees were formed to respond to the effects of COVID-19 on the education sector. The Ministry of Education provided guidelines and protocols around the COVID-19 response, with local governments being responsible for supporting, planning, and implementing at the local level. These guidelines were designed to first and foremost protect the health of the people of Sri Lanka and minimize the spread of the virus.

Sri Lanka, along with the rest of the world, rapidly adapted to the "new normal" of distance learning. This section looks at the action taken by the government during three phases of the school opening process (prior to reopening, part of the reopening process, and with school reopened).

Phase 1 - Prior to Reopening

Access to and participation in learning

In Sri Lanka, during the period of school closures, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Provincial Departments of Education (PDE) at national and subnational levels have attempted to provide continuous education for students. The MoE, in partnership with internet service providers, has activated its web-based learning platform E-thaksalawa and has dedicated two public television channels to the airing of educational programmes. Some private TV channels also gave one- to three-hour time slots to air educational content developed by the government. It is observed, through stakeholder interviews conducted for this case study, that some schools and teachers at their own initiative continued to provide lessons and assignments to students using mobile phone and print-based methods in different parts of the country.

As mentioned above, at the national level, the ministry provided distance learning for grades 5, 11 and 13 through two government-owned TV channels – Channel Eye and Nethra TV – in Tamil and Sinhala. The National Institute of Education (NIE), along with "model" teachers, developed and recorded classroom lessons to be broadcast on these two channels. Realising there are several challenges with delivering lessons through this medium, such as student engagement, attention and understanding, NIE partnered with the Open University, which has a high-quality recording studio, to create more engaging learning content. NIE created a national timetable that indicated which teaching content would be available on which media platform at what time, to make it easier for students and parents to engage.

In 2013, E-thaksalawa was launched- the national e-learning portal or open-source Learning Management System for general education. This platform for students and teachers provides access to a range of content for grades 1 to 13 – textbooks, syllabus, teacher instruction manuals, subject-related educational software, revision question papers, supplementary reading material, etc. These lessons are available in Sinhala, Tamil and English. To increase the usage of E-thaksalawa and ensure widespread access, the government of Sri Lanka took steps to provide access to the website free-of-charge through any telephone network. While the quality and effectiveness of the national online portal can be debated, the government's effort to provide free access, removed the burden on the family's income to pay for more telephone data or increased levels of WiFi usage, that would have otherwise prevented some children from poor households from accessing the plethora of learning material. Currently, several internet service providers in the country, like STL, Lanka Bell, Hutch, Mobiltel, Dialog and others, are providing special e-learning student data packages allowing children to study at home.

The Education Forum of Sri Lanka concluded that when the only device connected to the internet is a smartphone, then managing the assignments and notes is difficult. In addition, not all children had access to the internet or digital facilities (Tables 2 and 3). Table 2 shows that with only 34 per cent of the population, and only 40 per cent of households with school-aged children, have access to the internet. The reach of this platform was, therefore, limited. As shared during the consultation with the Eastern Province, O Level and A Level students had no direct teacher or school support when schools were closed and, despite efforts to provide alternatives, 6 per cent of primary students were uncontactable by teachers.

This resulted in provinces seeking additional, alternative means to ensure continued learning.

TABLE 2 | NATIONAL INTERNET CONNECTIVITY AND ACCESS[40]

Internet access	34% of the population
Internet connection in households with children aged 5-18	40%, with 90% accessed through mobile phone

TABLE 3 | ACCESS TO DIGITAL FACILITIES IN EASTERN PROVINCE[41]

LEVEL OF STUDENTS	STUDENTS WITH ACCESS TO DIGITAL FACILITIES	STUDENTS WITH NO ACCESS TO DIGITAL FACILITIES (WHO WERE PROVIDED WITH PRINTED MATERIALS INSTEAD)
A level students	53%	39%
O level students	42%	40%
Primary students	39%	55%

At the local level, the Provincial Department of Education (PDE) adapted the national guidelines to their local context. In Uva province, when schools were instructed to shut down, all school principals, zonal and divisional government officials were gathered at the provincial level by the Director of Education to discuss plans for the learning continuity of students. The Provincial Department of Education took several measures to reach as many children as possible in their province, particularly those in exam grades (5, 11, 12 and 13), so that they could complete the syllabus in time for the exam. Realising that not all students in their province would have access to the internet, an Uva radio channel broadcast subject lessons for students in these exam grades and five newspapers were especially circulated for them.

Understanding that distance learning methods of learning continuity was not possible for young children in early-primary, the Ministry of Education collaborated with UNICEF to distribute study packs for grades 1 and 2. While recognition of this is important, more needs to be explored in terms of what type of distance learning methods and content works for different age groups. There was also little provision for pre-primary children, which meant that parents were primarily responsible for continuing the development of their foundational skills.

Individual schools and teachers reached out to students in the manner that was best suited to the students. Teachers played a central role in coordinating and facilitating distance learning for their students while schools were closed. Understanding the needs of their students the

best, teachers improvised the means of connecting with their students. According to a teacher at Ginigathena Central College,[42] she recorded her classroom lessons and sent them to her students via video messaging, ensuring that children who could not attend live online classes would still be able to use those videos and learn in their own time. She also personally went to the homes of some children to check in on their progress and encourage the parents to more fully engage with their child's education.

Mobile applications like WhatsApp and Viber were also widely used by most teachers to maintain constant communication with their students, other teachers and school management, given the fluid nature of planning. According to the Additional Director of Education, Primary, of the Eastern Province,[43] teachers made WhatsApp/Viber groups for their students, sent homework worksheets, and requested pictures of their completed work. When asked if teachers received any training on distance learning modalities, it was widely agreed that due to the sudden nature of the school closures, most schools did not have time to train its teachers and ensure that they had sufficient capabilities.

Despite this lack of structured support, teachers demonstrated their ability to quickly adopt technology-based teaching solutions, develop innovative ways to reach their children and an overall commitment and passion to their profession.

Safe operations

The Ministry of Health (MoH) led in spreading awareness of the virus, identifying and communicating the measurements people needed to take to keep themselves and others safe. The MoH produced detailed guidelines on health protection for school children (how students travel, use of materials, co-curricular activities, etc.) which steered MoE protocol, and Health authorities communicated this to parents. Several national mass media campaigns were launched by the government, with the support of development partners, to share the latest information on the pandemic and establish prevention measures. See Chapter 3 for more details on how the national and local-level stakeholders successfully rolled out coordinated response plans.

Community participation

There have been a wide range of messaging and awareness-raising campaigns around WASH and COVID-19. As the Ministry of Health took the technical lead in all government response planning, scientific facts and evidence-based actions and information were shared with the public frequently. It is now widely accepted that community buy-in and cooperation in undertaking preventative measures was key to reducing the number of COVID-19 cases in the country. Sri Lanka, with an over-90 per cent literacy rate among adults,[44] had a high engagement with the general public and was successful in following government/WHO regulations on a large scale.

Health and well-being

Health and nutrition have long been an integral part of a school's functioning in Sri Lanka, providing services such as school meals, nutritional screening and support to malnourished children, and offering immunization, deworming, etc. For adolescents, the government had already established a network of walk-in centres that provided a range of health and well-being services. Mental health support was provided through government 'helplines', mental health clinics, and qualified teachers in some schools.

As conveyed during online consultations with health experts, many of these services were either paused by the government or were difficult to access by children due to school closures, curfews and lockdowns. Cognisant of the nutritional needs of children, the government, with the involvement of the WFP, made plans for the distribution of dry food rations to substitute for school meals. Through mass media campaigns, families were encouraged to grow healthy foods in home kitchen gardens in which school children could be involved.

To reduce the burden on public hospitals while continuing to provide health services to non-COVID-19 patients, public health midwives (PHM) were made responsible for the families in their catchment area, expanding their work from mothers and children to include adolescents. Families could seek advice from PHM on how to access specific health services throughout the period of lockdown.

Finances

As of 2016, 4.1 per cent of the population in Sri Lanka was living below the national poverty threshold[45] and are most likely to be affected by the broad-ranging socio-economic impacts related to COVID-19. The global United Nations advice to countries is: "This unprecedented crisis requires unprecedented measures – a massive counter-cyclical fiscal and financial effort is urgently needed everywhere." This is in line with calls by the IMF and World Bank to expand social assistance as part of a fiscal stimulus package.[46]

The government's existing Samurdhi beneficiary scheme is a social welfare system that has up to 4.4 million people registered for social benefits, and is the current mechanism used by the government to target those who are most vulnerable. However, there are many who have been adversely affected by the economic impact of COVID-19 that fall outside this social safety net mechanism and have little support.[47]

The government of Sri Lanka's initial encouraging response to this has been to provide 5.7 million monthly transfers of (LKR 5,000 Sri Lankan Rupee, equivalent to about 25 US Dollars) to households (the duration of the payments is unknown). The main channels of support are via existing social assistance schemes such as Samurdhi, the Senior Citizens' and Disability Allowances as well as a new scheme for self-employed workers. However, there were challenges in identifying self-employed workers due to the weaknesses in the national social protection system which, even before the crisis, excluded the majority of its intended recipients. UNICEF's[48] analysis suggests that 34 per cent of households, around half of all single parents/caregivers and nearly a third of children and people over the age of 70 may be excluded from this cash assistance.[49] In addition, the flat payment of LKR 5,000 per household means that the effective value of the transfer per person varies across different sizes of household.

The fact that many households affected by the crisis will miss out on support, alongside the low level of per-capita payments, may lead to confusion and enhance the risk of social unrest. At the cost of only 0.16 per cent of GDP per month, the current fiscal response is insufficient to adequately protect the economy.

As a complementary solution an emergency Universal Child Benefit (UCB) could be an important component of this broader package of support provided by the government. It would ensure that the vast majority of households across the country can access a minimum level of income support. A UNICEF study[50] across five countries in South Asia indicates that a UCB costing 2 per cent of GDP over six months would provide the recipient population with an average of between 18 and 46 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 expenditure, with particularly high benefits for the poorest members of society. A more detailed analysis in Sri Lanka demonstrates that the scheme would more than replace the income losses experienced by many families as a result of the COVID-19 crisis; the benefits to child well-being, the economy, social cohesion and political stability are likely to be significant while recovery from the crisis will be much quicker.

Education System

While the teaching-learning aspect of the education sector adapted very quickly and was quite flexible in reacting to the fluid nature of the response, the education management system was not so adaptive. The monitoring and school support activities did not proceed at the speed of changes and failed to capture the impact of what was going on in the education sector. Please see section 3.2 for more details on the challenges faced by the education system in adequately monitoring the sector.

Phase 2 - Part of the reopening process

Access to and participation in learning

From the onset, the MoE was very clear that before the reopening of schools was possible, a safe and healthy environment should be established and that officials of the MoH should be satisfied with such measures. Safe school reopening manuals and checklists were developed to guide schools on how to limit exposure to the virus and reduce the chances of transmission in schools. A central aspect of all guidance was behaviour change communication aimed at the school community: to engage parents, leaders, alumni and others in day-to-day activities, and spread awareness of health and well-being needs over the long term. It was widely understood and believed that in order to help children continue their education, everyone must play a role in keeping them safe.

A consensus among the participants of the stakeholder consultations for this case study was that all decisions made were guided by MoH and the scientific/health evidence provided by medical specialists/institutions. Substantive consultations with provincial authorities (especially the provincial education authorities) allowed the operationalization of school reopenings in their provinces according to local needs and realities.

In 2020, the government placed high importance on equity by taking a nationwide, grade-by-grade approach for school reopenings instead of reopening schools by location, high/low-risk areas, type of school, etc. This helped minimize immediate inequities in the amount of face-to-face learning among students of the same grade and prevented a widening of the gap in access to school-based learning. However, this might change as the pandemic evolves.

Safe operations and community participation

The government guidelines on school reopening [51] instructed schools to take a minimum of one week for preparation to make schools safe for returning students. School principals and teachers went back to school to prepare for school reopening, including ensuring adequate WASH facilities and compliance with IPC standards, as directed by the overall guidance from the zonal and provincial education authorities. Parents, School Development Society (SDS), old boys' clubs and other alumni associations were actively engaged to help teachers/principals in the preparation. They were also found to be very active in local-level fundraising of direct or in-kind contribution from local NGOs, private entities, alumni, etc., since the financial allocation support from the government was insufficient. UNICEF (in coordination with the provincial authorities) also supported the facilitation of local-level fundraising/partnerships to complement the direct assistance from MoE.

As per the MoE Instruction Manual of Preparedness of Schools and other Education Institutes to prevent the spread of COVID-19, all schools had to comply with the following regulations or risk being fined:

- Handwashing station at the entrance
- Establish sick rooms (separate for boys and girls)
- Disinfection of the entire school premise and equipment
- Giving clear roles and responsibilities, and training to academic and non-academic staff in ensuring and monitoring safe operations

Developing a communication plan for the school for coordinating with the relevant authorities, parents before school reopening, children during school hours, and an emergency Family Health Bureau.

The Ministry of Education, Health Promotion Bureau of the MoH and UNICEF launched 'COVID-19: New Lessons for the New Term' media campaign to spread awareness around safe school reopening practices for schools, children and parents. UNICEF supported the development of communication materials in local languages, including a video for pre-school teachers as well as posters, signboards and cartoon books for general education in schools. UNICEF also supported the development of cartoon books depicting pictures related to the IPC measures to be delivered to all primary schools nationwide.

Measures are in place to enable safe school resumption, are implemented, and are continually reinforced. Monitoring and evaluation of measures and adaptability is required to keep all learners safe and infection rates low.

Health and well-being

Recognizing that the process of sudden school closures and reopenings, along with the other stress factors related to the pandemic, could cause increased anxiety among children of all ages, the government specifically addressed mental health issues in its guidelines and planned for safe school reopening. The Instructional Manual of Preparedness of schools and other educational institutions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, May 2020, gave the following guidance on how to identify mental stress in children and facilitate psychosocial needs:

How to identify mental stresses in children?

- Lack of interest in an activity used to do before
- Sleep deprivation or sleepiness more than ever
- Behavior problems/easily getting angry/violent
- Reduced self-esteem
- Poor memory
- Lack of concentration
- Physical symptoms such as change of appetite, headache
- Easily irritated
- Inappropriate behavior for age
- Displaying stubborn attitudes

Facilitate mental health and psychosocial needs

- Give opportunities and encourage students to discuss their problems and possible solutions.
- Make them understand that it's normal to face such difficult situations and encourage them to express their ideas.
- Keep in touch, at least via telephone, with children who are not attending school.

- Provide accurate information and adapt them to suit each age group.
- Provide services of a Counseling Teacher.

A checklist for setting up and maintaining handwashing facilities and devices was also provided by MoE. In addition, schools were advised to "delay the attendance of the children with immunocompromized diseases and who are on immunocompromising medication. They should not attend school until further notice". [52]

Other actions taken to support health and well-being included:

- **Health promotion:** Only four districts were considered high risk in the first wave of the pandemic. Health staff in other areas had time to support schools in health promotion, working with school health clubs and supported by public health inspectors for promotional activities on safety measures.
- **School meal replacement:** In addition to providing dry food rations, families were encouraged to grow healthy foods in home kitchen gardens in which school children could be involved.
- **School medical Inspection:** In low-risk areas, Medical Officers of Health carried out routine school health inspections, including school immunization following reopening. In high-risk areas, immunization was contingent on the availability of facilities.
- **De-worming** and weekly iron folate supplementation have been offered whilst schools remain open, although the normal high coverage >90 per cent may not be achieved in 2020.
- **Mental health:** Helplines were widely advertised to support mental health needs while mental health clinics resumed operations in May 2020. Upon reopening, qualified teachers have provided psychosocial support and student counselling, working closely with students.
- **Adolescents:** Public health midwives (PHM) were made responsible for all families in their catchment area, expanding their work from mothers and children to include adolescents. Families could seek advice from PHM on how to access specific health services throughout the period of lockdown.
- **Teacher training:** As per MoE guidelines, teachers have been provided with orientations on the actions that should be taken if a child gets sick in school – regarding use of sick bays, communication with health authorities and area-specific hotlines to inform the MoE of any outbreaks.

Ginigathena Central College is an upper secondary school located in Hatton education zone in Nuwara Eliya district (in the middle of the country). Through an online consultation with the school principal, teachers, students, School Development Society (SDS) and Old Boys' Association (OBA) members, it was assessed that the school should be reopened in very systematic way in line with the requisite health guidelines. Although Government funds allocated for safe school reopening were not sufficient to establish and maintain WASH facilities in the school, the principal showed tremendous initiative and leadership and was able to mobilize resources from different sources such as private companies, individual donors and community-based organizations (CBOs) in order to implement a well-organized handwashing and sanitary system on the school premises. Members of the SDS and OBA also closely worked with the principal to organize the safe reopening. Each student was provided with five different coloured face masks for each day of the week. This is to make sure that students don't reuse one face mask for several consecutive days, which can increase health risks. The principal also frequently collected feedback from the students and parents to improve the existing WASH facilities and other safety measures.

Phase 3: With schools reopened

Access to and participation in learning

As mentioned in Chapter 2.2, the government had an agile response to the evolving and unpredictable effects of the spread of the pandemic with regards to school reopenings. In summary, there were three phases of school reopenings, starting with all schools reopening in August 2020, then only for grade 6 and above in November 2020 (excluding for Western Province and isolated areas) and, most recently, for grades 2 and above in January 2021.

The government has tried to maintain a balance between keeping children and their communities safe and continuing their structured in-school learning. These disruptions have had a clear impact on children's attendance and learning levels.

Impact on attendance

Attendance after the first phase of school closure: according to MoE officials interviewed in October 2020, no significant dropouts had been reported by the provinces after schools reopened for the first time. Attendance rates were almost at pre-COVID-19 levels. This is assumed to be because there was no community transmission and very high levels of awareness among parents of the importance of education, especially for girls.[53] Field monitoring reports from four UNICEF-supported provinces over two weeks in July presented some indicative information on attendance rates once schools reopened:

- The first week (6 July) after school reopening, there was an average 80 per cent attendance rate. This is around the same level of student attendance during the pre-COVID-19 period (80-85 per cent).
- The second week (27 July) – two weeks after the interrupted opening due to the rise in pre-COVID-19 transmission rates – a lower student attendance rate was measured, especially for the upper-secondary level (Grade 12-13), which saw a less than 50 per cent student attendance.

During both weeks, there are large variations by region. It is important that necessary plans are made to further identify and confirm the reasons for those remaining out of school and the reasons for their absence in order to better manage timely interventions.

Attendance after the second phase of school closures: Attendance monitoring from the four UNICEF-supported provinces in the weeks after schools reopened for the second time on 23 November 2020 shows a very different picture. Attendance rates of children and teachers were much lower than pre-COVID-19 times. The main reason for this decrease, according to the UNICEF attendance monitoring reports, was growing fears of the increased spread of the virus due to the prevalence of community transmission. Figures from the UNICEF monitoring reports are as follows:

- During the first week of school reopening, the average attendance rate for students across the four provinces of Uva, Central, East and Northern was 51.25 per cent, with the highest in Uva province at 67.08 per cent and the lowest in Central province with 32.3 per cent.
- At the same time, the average attendance rates for teachers across the four provinces was 77.63 per cent, with the highest also in Uva province at 87.02 per cent and the lowest in Central at 61.5 per cent.

The main reason cited for the low levels of attendance was the link between COVID-19 cases and schools, which made parents reluctant to send their children to school.

Impact on learning continuity

The government continues to provide lessons through a dedicated public TV channel for the grades that will sit public exams in the coming months. Online classrooms and the delivery of lessons through digital platforms that were widely used during the school closures have now been discontinued. However, certain private schools continue to conduct classes on Zoom for selected students who have not yet been asked to return to school.

With the uncertainty around when schools will reopen and for how long, it has been difficult for schools and provincial officers to gather data on the quality and effectiveness of the distance learning materials across different grades. At the time of conducting stakeholder consultations in October 2020, there were no standardized planned assessments of the learning levels of students once they returned to school to judge if there was any learning loss and how to address such gaps. Considering there have been large variations in the type of distance learning modes used by students, the number of learning hours they could dedicate within a day, the type of support they received from their parents and teachers, as well as the quality of learning materials developed at the provincial levels, learning gaps between pupils of the same grade are extremely likely.

Evidence from other countries strongly indicates that students, especially in primary and pre-primary, have slipped back in terms of their learning levels. Given this likely learning loss, if teachers were to continue teaching the syllabus without addressing this learning loss, there is a serious risk of children being left behind and unable to achieve age/grade-appropriate competencies.

In the absence of national guidelines and interventions to support children to catch up, provincial ministries took it upon themselves to respond to the needs of students. The text box below details what measures MoE in Uva province with support from UNICEF took to minimize the learning gaps in primary education after the first school closure.

"Our primary focus is to keep children happy when they return to school" – Uva province online consultation

Building on the experience of the Uva province initiative, with regards to the assessment of learning gaps and the implementation of the multi-level pedagogical methods to help children catch up, UNICEF is supporting the Ministry of Education to scale up this initiative as a national strategy for learning recovery. Currently, national strategies and guidelines are being developed based on those strategies trialled in Uva and Central province. This is an important step in the right direction, to collect nationally standardized data on the learning levels of children on the basis of which learning recovery and remedial education plans will be implemented across Sri Lanka.

Example of an initiative taken by Uva province to help children catch up:

During the consultation with the representatives of Uva Provincial Ministry of Education, it was shared that Uva MoE and UNICEF have worked to 'minimize learning gaps in primary education' after the long school closure periods by undertaking the following activities for approximately 124,000 students across grades 1–4 in all 23 education divisions of Uva province:

- **Conducting a learning diagnosis test** with all students in grades 1 to 4. This initial diagnostic test is to be conducted during the first week of school reopening. This would not be a paper-based assessment. The respective class teacher of each primary grade will assess the competency levels of each student by assigning a pre-planned set of activities. The teacher has five days in which to undertake these activities with the students and assess them in line with the competencies. However, the students are not informed it is an assessment. At the end of the assessment, each class teacher needs to hand over the summary sheet of the assessment to the responsible in-service advisor (ISA). In the provincial MoE, a team of primary directors and ISAs analyze the summary sheets and identify the competencies for overall gaps.

- **Reorganizing primary curriculum** based on the findings of the above-mentioned learning diagnosis test: After identifying the competencies most in need of learning, the curriculum for each grade will be reorganized to prioritize such competencies. Lesson plans, model lessons and learning resources will be prepared by focusing on those prioritized competencies in line with multi-level pedagogical methods. Simultaneously, a set of curricular and co-curricular activities will be developed to improve targeted competencies. Most of these curricular and co-curricular activities are designed to be performed as home-based activities with the support of parents and other family members. Teachers are requested to keep records on how well these home-based activities have been performed.

- **Introducing a blended-learning approach** for reinforcing those competencies deemed weak, combining face-to-face teaching inside the classroom while continuing self-learning activities via online platforms.

Education finance

At the time of conducting consultations for this case study, the 2021 national budget debates were ongoing,[54] and the Ministry of Education is expected to request a 10 per cent increase in the budget for education.[55] However, there is ultimately a shortage in the budget to enable a safe, and sustained, return to school. Pre-COVID-19, Sri Lanka had low government spending on education. With the re-classification of the country from upper-middle to lower-middle-income, there are concerns that the education spend will be affected. This, coming at a time when the financial requirement to equip all schools with the facilities/supplies to comply with the infection prevention and control standards has significantly increased.

Since the education programme and investment budget is limited, in addition to prioritizing the budget for WASH in schools, Infection Prevention and Control, MoE has been undertaking a large-scale reprogramming of donor funds to support schools to maintain safe operations. Taking this into consideration, the government will need a strategy for sustainable, equity-based sector financing. The investment strategy by MoE also needs to prioritize and secure the necessary budget for learning recovery. The sector must invest in helping children to catch up and reduce the learning inequity that increased during school closures. A prerequisite for assessing the level of investment needed is accurate and realistic data from within the education sector, which is currently weak (as discussed in more detail in section 3.2).

This is also the right time to conduct a Public Expenditure Review (PER) of the education sector to review service delivery, its effects, and the demand for and perceptions of the quality of services. In short, the review can assess how efficiently the government is utilizing available resources, and if the current levels of spending are sufficient. Such a review would lead to a more in-depth analysis of pre- and post-COVID-19 education financing and effectiveness. Such a PER was conducted for the nutrition sector in Sri Lanka by the World Bank between 2014 and 2018.

Education system

The regular monitoring of schools at the local level ensured that students remained safe once schools had opened. As shared during stakeholder interviews, at the provincial level, in-service advisors (ISAs) were responsible for five schools each and conducted inspections once a month using the school safety checklist for schools that had reopened, prepared by the MoH and MoE. The ISA would then report the findings to the Divisional Director of Education, who would report to the Zonal Director of Education. Public Health Inspectors conducted similar spot checks in schools and their surrounding communities. However, this was not done systematically across all provinces, nor was the data consolidated at the national level to provide reports on how schools were coping after reopening in the midst of a pandemic, analyse common areas in which schools struggled, and develop wide-reaching strategies to systematically address these issues.

The most common issues shared by stakeholders in Uva, Central and Eastern province was the availability of water and WASH infrastructure facilities. Many schools struggled to provide continuous tap water for children to wash their hands, especially in rural areas where the water infrastructure is not well developed.

The MoE is currently undertaking a large-scale education reform process. The ultimate objective of the reforms is to implement a student-centric education system instead of the existing exam-centric education model [56] that appropriately skills young people to enter the job market and be productive citizens in the long term. It was shared during the online consultations that a revised curriculum will be piloted in 2021 and launched in 2023. Incorporating lessons learned from the pandemic, the revised curriculum is expected to introduce self-learning modules from grade 6 onwards, with the assistance of more developed online learning platforms.

Details of the reform process have not yet been made public, however, building resilience to future shocks within the system will be crucial.

Lessons from the Uva/Central province initiative (and the subsequent national scale-up) should be adopted and an analysis of how the multi-level approach to learning recovery fits within the wider education reform process must be conducted.

03

Thematic deep dive: Collaborative response and opportunities for strengthening monitoring systems

This section explores lessons learned from successful coordination of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, identifies gaps and makes recommendations for improved monitoring within the education sector based on the desk study and eleven (individual and group) stakeholder meetings. Details on the stakeholder meetings and their participants can be found in the Annex.

At the time of developing this case study, Sri Lanka was widely seen as a success story in South Asia with regards to the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic. The effective management of the response also led to Sri Lanka being the first country in South Asia to have safely reopened all schools and all grades nationally (for the first time in August 2020). A key factor of this success was the efficient coordination of relevant actors and institutions. Meaningful coordination between and among different Government ministries at the national and local levels, as well as between the Government and other development partners (UN agencies, NGOs and private-sector companies) allowed for continuity of learning for school children and safe school reopening.

FIGURE 6 | ADMINISTRATIVE LAYERS OF GOVERNMENT
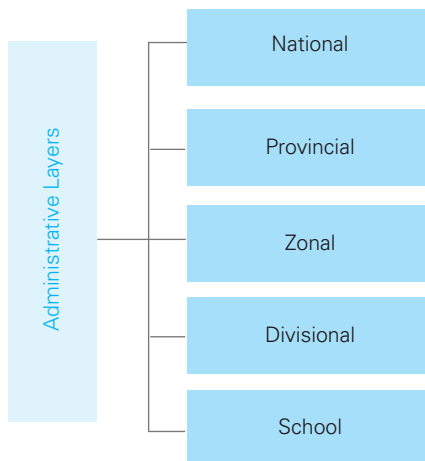
The first section of this chapter will identify and analyze the approach to this successful coordination and its impact.

The second section of this chapter will share weaknesses identified by relevant stakeholders, and discusses opportunities to strengthen the education monitoring systems in Sri Lanka to enhance evidence-based decision making and standardize delivery. While commendable efforts have been made to tackle the widespread and devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the short term, the education sector will, like others, need to strategically respond to its long-term impact. A robust education monitoring system with digital tools and platforms that present real-time, meaningful, and comprehensive data will allow for rapid, adaptive and targeted planning and intervention by the Government to build a more resilient education sector in the long term.

3.1 A Coordinated Response to COVID-19

Approach to Successful Coordination

The following were identified through stakeholder consultations as key factors that led to the effective and efficient coordinated response to the pandemic in general, and to safe school reopenings specifically:

Guided by science and evidence - Sri Lanka's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been swift, decisive, and coordinated. Most importantly, the Government's response in all sectors was guided by scientific evidence. The Ministry of Health and Indigenous Services provided technical guidance on how to navigate the pandemic.[57] The Ministry of Education (especially the school health and nutrition department), adapted the guidance from the Ministry of Health (MoH). They put the health of students and teachers first, and decisions were made based on scientific evidence.

Participatory approach - In January 2020, the President appointed a National Steering Committee to bring together a range of stakeholders from different sectors to support the COVID-19 response. The National Steering Committee included the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Ports and Shipping, the Civil Aviation Authority, Department of Customs, Department of Immigration and Emigration, the Disaster Management Centre, airports, and country consulates. In terms of operationalising their response plans, Sri Lanka adopted the whole-of-government approach with four lines of operation as seen in Figure 7.

FIGURE 7 | THE FOUR LINES OF GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS FOR THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

Source: Infographic taken from, Combatting COVID-19 Sri Lankan Approach: concept paper by Sri Lanka State Intelligence Services

1. Tri-Forces (military, police, and intelligence) focusing on detection, isolation and tracing, for example, establishing and managing quarantine centres and enforcing laws and regulations during lockdown periods

2. Medical and healthcare focusing on testing, contact tracing and treatment

3. Psychological operations focusing on providing people with the right information, public confidence-building and consolidating solidarity

4. Economic and psychosocial well-being operations responsible for ensuring the immediate needs for basic services are met, and developing plans to maintain a healthy economy for the future.[58]

These four lines of operation were managed by various key actors working together to protect the Sri Lankan society from all major effects of the pandemic. As per a WHO country case study: "The statistics reflect the success of the country's ability to respond to an epidemic, saving lives and protecting its population. The proactive and rapid preventive strategies that were implemented and the combined public health approach with strong leadership and whole-of-society approach have helped Sri Lanka to be in the position it is today."[59]

Building trust between Government and citizens through strong communications – With the MoH leading on the building and sharing of evidence, a participatory approach to the response, and one line of operations dedicated to delivering information, messaging about the pandemic was consistent across all levels and channels of communication. The awareness-raising efforts also focused on building trust with the people of Sri Lanka. The Health Promotion Bureau of the MoH, which is responsible for risk communication and community engagement, worked closely with the WHO and UNICEF from the start to raise awareness of COVID-19 through mass communication.

They also worked closely together to monitor, identify, and analyse rumours and misinformation. An alliance was

Strong coordination and leadership by the MoE, and the fact that misinformation and rumour were quickly dispelled, led to a clear understanding of risk assessments in schools, the development of clear, strong, and actionable protocols, as well as strong institutional trust in government and its messaging among parents and community members facilitated the reopening of schools.

formed between the Health Promotion Bureau of MoH and local-level officials from various departments and ministries, to better reach different community groups with correct and consistent information about COVID-19 transmission, its effect, and effective prevention measures. The mainstream media was engaged to help disseminate this information. In early March 2020, the Government established a 24/7 hotline to invite public feedback and communicate accurate information about COVID-19 to the public. A designated COVID-19 website[60] with all information about COVID-19 in Sri Lanka was developed, and a chatbot was launched to provide the most current evidence-based information.

Considering the multicultural population of Sri Lanka, all communication contents and materials were developed in the three official languages of Sri Lanka: Sinhala, Tamil, and English. This was important to ensure that the information reached and was understood by the target audience. Community and religious leaders, musicians and celebrities, youth groups and volunteers, all participated in community engagement activities to further build trust in the information-sharing efforts of the Government.

The Government maintained transparency regarding the situation of the pandemic in the country and kept the population informed with the most up-to-date information. During the height of the pandemic in the country, the director-general of health services, army commanders and police spokespeople provided daily updates in the morning and evening in the media, to keep people informed and prevent panic. In addition, daily situation reports on COVID-19 were published by the epidemiology unit of the Ministry of Health on their website.[61]

The above actions and initiatives led to the public trusting the information being shared by national and local government sources. According to the survey conducted by Sparkwinn Research on COVID-19-related communications and community engagement, 98 per cent of people were aware of the coronavirus and its associated effects; 84 per cent claimed to trust information from known medical professionals; and a majority followed the key COVID-19 prevention practices by 'staying home', 'washing hands' and 'wearing masks'.[62]

Strong coordination and leadership by the MoE, and the fact that misinformation and rumour were quickly dispelled, led to a clear understanding of risk assessments in schools, the development of clear, strong, and actionable protocols, as well as strong institutional trust in Government and its messaging among parents and community members facilitated the reopening of schools. when schools reopened under new safety guidelines, there was a high level of buy-in from parents and the wider community, who were supportive of the reopening process. The process of reopening was consistent across all provinces. However, with the drop in levels of attendance after the second school reopening, possibly due to community transmission of the virus, the support for school reopenings decreased. There needs to be further analysis of why the trust in Government guidelines and communication had dropped to ensure the maintenance of high attendance rates during the next round of school reopenings.

Mechanisms of a coordinated response for safe school reopenings

National level

On 11 March 2020, the MoH announced the country's first local case of COVID-19, a Sri Lankan who worked as a tourist guide. On 20 March, the Government declared a lockdown, along with recommended public health measures in its effort to break the chain of transmission. The Government imposed movement restrictions, except for essential services. These measures continued for eight weeks, coordinated by the Tri-Forces, police, and national intelligence, to ensure public compliance.

On 26 March, a Presidential Task Force (PTF) was established at the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO) (Figure 8). The PTF is co-chaired by Minister of Health and Indigenous Medical Services, Mrs Pavithra Wanniarachchi, and the Head of the NOCPCO, Army Commander, Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, to coordinate COVID-19 response. The Ministry of Health took the technical lead and the Tri-Forces took the operational lead.

In support of the coordinated national effort led by the Government, development partners and the humanitarian community also strengthened their commitment to working with the Government of Sri Lanka on behalf of its

people. They drafted the Sri Lanka Country Preparedness and Response Plan (CPRP)[63] as a living document that outlines the manner by which the humanitarian community (with its respective sector clusters) is coming together in a coordinated way to support the Government-led response efforts to this crisis. The CPRP has been drafted under the assumption that the number of COVID-19 cases will continue to rise[64] with response actions for each sector cluster. The CPRP is to be read in conjunction with the Government of Sri Lanka's Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (SPRP) that addresses Health Response actions, and the Socio-Economic Response Plan that focuses on immediate to longer-term recovery.

FIGURE 8 | SECTOR COORDINATION MECHANISMS IN PLACE FOR THE COVID-19 RESPONSE
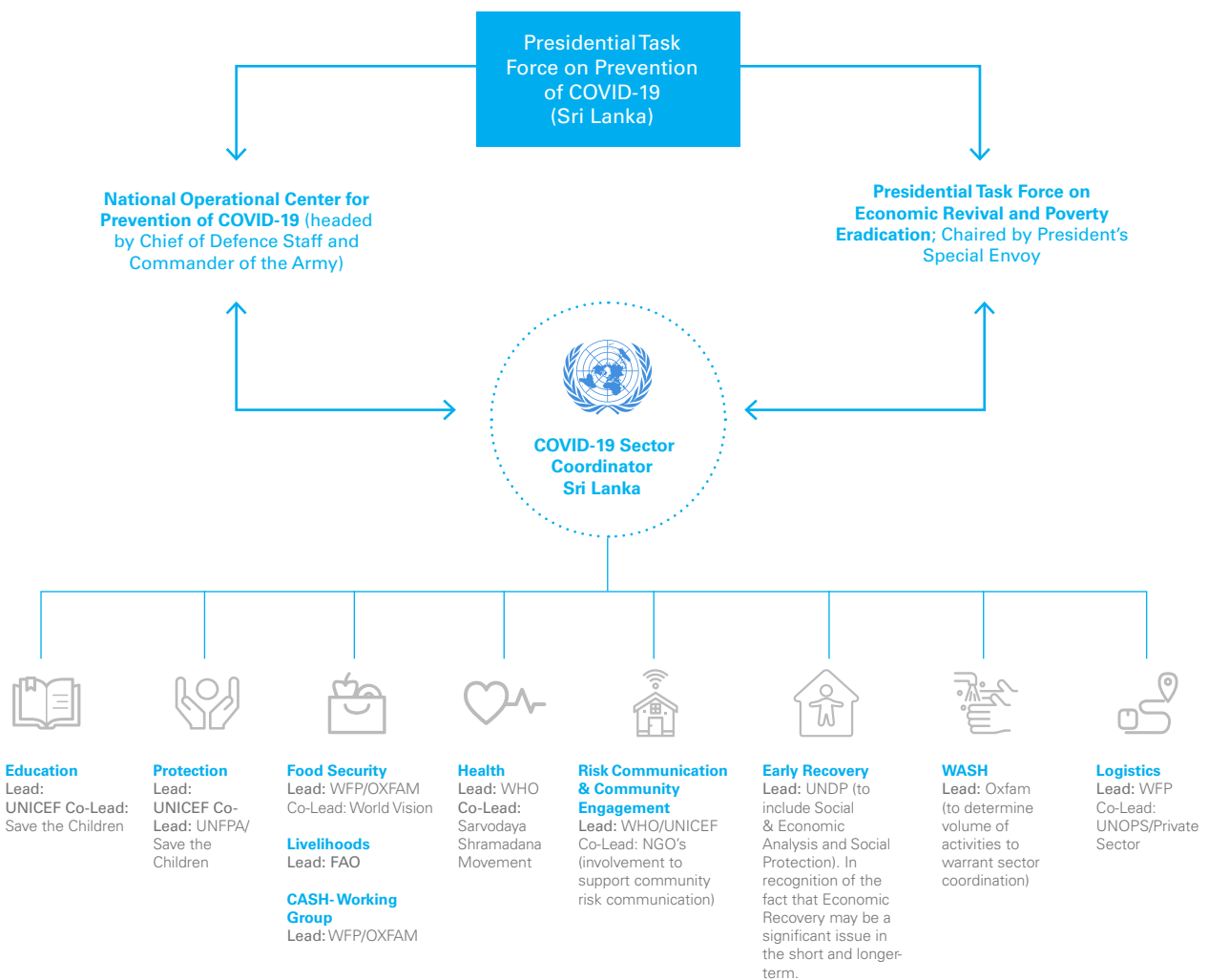
For the education sector specifically, a COVID-19 Education Presidential Task Force (PTF) was established for the continuity of the education sector in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, while also recommending methods to modernize primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors in Sri Lanka, in keeping with contemporary needs. In May 2020, the first 26-member PTF was co-chaired by the secretaries of the Ministries of Education and Higher Education. Members include secretary to the Ministry of Skill Development, vice-chancellors of universities and principals of leading schools.[65] These high-level task forces led by the senior-most Government officials from various ministries set the tone for cross-sectoral collaboration from the beginning. The Education PTF put together a Coordinating Committee to give special attention to and oversee the collaboration between the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and the armed forces working together at all levels to ensure safe learning continuity.

The education cluster – a collective of key actors in the education sector – led by UNICEF (and co-led by Save the Children) also played an instrumental role in facilitating coordination at the national and local levels.

As per the CPRP described above, the main objectives of the education cluster are to:

- Prevent the spread of COVID-19 through educational institutions
- Ensure continuity of learning in case of school closures, while also focusing on child safety and well-being during school closures, and
- Preparation of schools for reopening, and maintain their normal administrative operations until the end of 2020.

UNICEF, in coordination with other education cluster members, supported the MoE in developing the Education Sector Response Plan. UNICEF has also been active and instrumental in enabling a coordinated approach in supporting the Government/MoE for school reopening in line with this plan.

The plan includes support for the facilitation of cross-sectoral coordination (especially between MoE and MoH) as well as streamlining and prioritization of funding from various development partners (WB, UNICEF, NGO partners, etc.) according to the priority needs of the country. This has enabled a more needs-based, pro-equity system of financial support to provinces/schools which are most disadvantaged/in need. For example, in August 2020, in preparation for the safe reopening of schools, UNICEF, in collaboration with the MoE and the Health Promotion Bureau of the MoH, launched the 'COVID-19: New Lessons for the New Term' media campaign about easy measures to adopt to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 through educational institutions.

At the local and regional levels

While national decisions, including setting the school reopening dates and the national infection prevention and control (IPC) standards/guidelines, etc. were made at the central level, their operationalization was delegated to the local (provincial) level. Mirroring in the roles and responsibilities of the national level task force for COVID-19 response, a multi-sectoral Provincial Task Force, led by the governor of the province, was established to develop contextual implementation plans of national guidelines and oversee their operationalization.

Specifically for the education sector, Health Promotion Committees, under the purview of the MoE, were established at various levels – Provincial, Zonal and institutional (school, university, etc.) – as the local level coordination mechanism for operationalizing school reopenings.

The provincial Health Promotion Committees comprise the provincial director of education, provincial director of health, district secretary, district director of health services, zonal director of education and representatives from other identified sectors such as the transport sector, security and local government offices. They are tasked with taking the lead in operationalizing school reopenings, including ensuring schools meet and follow IPC standards. These standards relate to both infrastructure (i.e., WASH facilities, IPC supplies, sick rooms) and training and capacity building (such as orientation for teachers, school principals and education administrators on the IPC standards/safe school operation guidelines). At the provincial level, all decisions should be made in accordance with the guidelines and instructions issued by the provincial director of health services. Health Promotion Committees at the zonal and institutional level were under the guidance of the director of district health services and medical officer of health, respectively.

Schools and other institutions could only be reopened after the assurance of the Health Promotion Committee that the school environment was safe and healthy. Joint decisions made at the national level were cascaded down to the provincial level through official memos and circulars and the Government website. In both Eastern and Uva province, once the MoE and MoH circular on school reopening was received, the Secretary to the State Minister organized a meeting with the governor, provincial director of education, director of health services, zonal director of education and representatives from identified important sectors such as the transport sector and local government offices. Similar meetings took place at the zonal, district and school levels to prepare for safe school reopening.

Schools relied heavily on coordinating with school development societies, and alumni clubs (like the old boys' clubs) to help them prepare in terms of infrastructure and facilities, and to assist in engaging parents through meetings and mobile phone messaging.

Benefits of a coordinated response to safe school reopening

There were many benefits to this coordinated response, including those identified below during the stakeholder consultation meetings:

At present, while much of the world is still battling with the pandemic and eagerly awaiting the vaccine, Sri Lanka's whole-of-government approach to a coordinated response gives the Government a comprehensive view of how the education sector is coping with the effects of school closures and reopenings. Additionally, the education sector itself has a clear understanding of how its work aligns with the broader national response.

The collaborated response, being led by the MoE with technical guidance from MoH, also ensures that the health, safety and well-being of students is at the centre of all efforts towards the continuance of learning.

The response has enabled the identification of funding gaps and has allowed support in financing and resources to be filled in by other Government sectors such as health, nutrition and social protection, as well as by other development partners like UNICEF, WB, WFP and NGOs.

Then response has led to efficiency within the wider system as coordination between national and local levels has reduced duplication and repetition, enabled the timely sharing of key information, resources, and has helped to extend reach.

The silos within which different ministries and departments operated have been broken down to a great degree and collaboration through the different task forces has filtered down from the national level to the provincial level.[66] While this is an ongoing process with areas for improvement at different levels and sectors, it is definitely a move in the right direction. It is hoped that this collaboration will continue beyond the pandemic.

3.2 The challenges and opportunities to strengthen education monitoring systems

This section discusses the challenges and shortcomings in education monitoring systems during school closures and reopenings, as shared during the stakeholder consolations, as well as a discussion of the opportunities to strengthen education management systems.

The disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the weaknesses in education management systems around the world. Like many other countries, the Sri Lankan education monitoring systems faced many challenges during the pandemic and resulting school closures. While Sri Lanka succeeded in coordinating an effective cross-sectoral response to keep its people safe, it struggled to maintain comprehensive monitoring to assess the reach, effectiveness and impact of its response efforts, especially in the education sector.

Background

In Sri Lanka, the monitoring and evaluation of the education system has evolved since the early 2000s, where a top-down external inspection-based methodology was replaced by a new process supporting self-evaluation that empowered schools to manage themselves and increase accountability. Currently, there are two types of education monitoring systems in Sri Lanka:

- **Internal school monitoring** - done by the school principal, vice-principal, section head or selected senior teacher.
- **External school monitoring** – done by the divisional and zonal education offices.

About 9,000 schools (97 per cent of public schools and 88 per cent of all schools) are administered by the nine provincial councils, mainly through 97 zonal education and 365 divisional education offices. Provincial councils draw up education plans and budgets and employ and deploy provincial education administrators, principals, and teachers. Zonal authorities transfer and deploy principals and teachers within zones. Zonal education offices prepare annual monitoring plans to visit and monitor all schools at least once a year. The divisional education office prepares a divisional-level monitoring plan to cover all schools at least once per term. In one education zone, there can be a maximum of five divisions.

According to MoE guidance, both internal and external monitoring should be covered across the following eight thematic areas:

1. Students' performance

2. Teaching & learning process

3. Implementation of the curriculum

4. Students' welfare

5. Co-curricular activities

6. Leadership and management in the school

7. Physical resource management in the school

8. Community engagement with the school

After monitoring, the responsible officer/officers need to provide a scoring against each of the above topics. By calculating the scores of each topic, the School Education Quality Index (SEQI) is prepared. The score on this SEQI is subject to change at the end of each monitoring round. An annual school census is conducted every June to collect data on all schools in the country. In 2019, the paper-based census was transferred to a new online digital data-entry system. The 2020 census did not take place due to COVID-19, but the presence of an online digital data-entry system was an opportunity to closely monitor the impact of COVID-19 on education enrollment, and on learning. The digitisation of monitoring systems can serve as an important early warning system, and support school and zonal authorities to identify students and teachers who might be at risk of dropping out, or leaving the profession, and those who need additional support.

The challenges within education monitoring

Even prior to the pandemic, monitoring and evaluation was an area for much-needed improvement, with little standardization in how data is collected, analysed and used for decision making. From the national and provincial level stakeholder consultations, it can be surmised that monitoring within the education sector was one of the weakest aspects of the system response management. Following are the key challenges to the existing monitoring and evaluation system in the Sri Lankan education sector, as highlighted by MoE officials, school teachers and principals from Uva, Central and Eastern province during online consultations:

Monitoring during school closures:

- An enormous burden fell upon school principals and teachers to gather information on how many children had access to what type of distance-learning tools, distributing the learning materials to those with limited access to technology, and following up with students on an individual basis to ensure that they were engaging with the materials. Since there was no prior database on individual students with information on their access to IT outside of schools, this information was collected via mobile messages or through home visits conducted by the principal and teachers themselves. This led to delays in distributing learning materials and following up with children who had barriers to engagement with the materials.

- The monitoring process during school closures was also weak in assessing the capabilities of teachers and how they adapted to distance-learning modalities of teaching. There is little data to show which teachers easily adapted to teaching online, and which needed additional support.

- There was no systematic information collected on the quality of the distance learning materials. Without understanding how effective they were in supporting children to continue their education, timely improvements were not made to the materials to ensure they met students' learning needs.

- In the absence of distance learning modalities accessible to all, some students engaged in self-learning. Teachers, therefore, did not know what many of their students were learning during school closures.

- No formative assessments took place while schools were closed, and teachers did not know how students were learning, if at all. Therefore, when students return to school, teachers will have no indication of whether students participated in learning and, if they did, what they learned.

- Limited data was collected on how marginalized children – children with disabilities, with no access to distance learning materials, living in remote areas, etc. – were coping after schools were closed. While teachers were mostly aware of those children who were not reachable through distance learning modalities, no specific targeted intervention was organized to prevent learning inequity.

- No continuous monitoring and information gathering on students' welfare and mental health was collected to assess the psychological impact of the pandemic and how it might be affecting learning, which could then be attended to when schools reopened to ensure that learning outcomes are not severely affected.

Monitoring after schools reopened:

- MoE and MoH developed the safe school reopening checklist, used by in-service advisors (ISAs) once a month to monitor five schools each. The ISA then reported findings to the divisional director of education, who then reported to the provincial director of education. Public health inspectors conducted similar spot checks in schools and their surrounding communities. During this time, monitoring focused predominantly on health and safety protocols that schools needed to follow. However, no analysis was undertaken on which areas of safety schools struggled with and what more could be done to support them.

- Attendance data collected in school, was consolidated at the zonal level but not the provincial level in all provinces (except Eastern province where teacher and student attendance were collected and consolidated at the zonal and provincial level). MoE officials claimed that the attendance levels of students after school reopenings in August 2020 was the same as before schools closed. However, the opposite seemed to be the case for the second phase of school reopening, in November 2020, when student attendance had significantly decreased.[67] The collection and analysis of this data is critical for two reasons, i) to understand the impact of the COVID-19 education response plans on attendance, enrollment and dropout rates of students across Sri Lanka, and ii) what types of interventions are needed in the case of a decrease in the attendance rate to ensure children do not drop out, and help them catch up through remedial learning.

- No guidelines were provided by the MoE to assess the ongoing impact of distance learning. Provinces took it upon themselves to develop their own assessment plans and methodologies, often with support from UNICEF. In order to enhance distance-learning materials and tools to help students become self-learners over the long term and complement their in-class learning,

as of February 2021, a national survey on continuous learning is currently taking place. This will help in the understanding of which remote learning approaches have been effective. This information will help MoE be more resilient and better prepared in the case of future school closures.

- There was consensus in not wanting to burden students with tests as soon as they returned to school. However, this also meant that, at the time of conducting the stakeholder consultations, limited information on students needing remedial support was collected, and nor were there any national plans on increasing investment in remedial education to bring children up to speed and addressing learning loss.

In conclusion, there is very little ongoing information about the impact of school closures and distance learning on the overall well-being and development of children in Sri Lanka nor what targeted strategies should be developed to address any negative effects in the short and long term. Evidence from past prolonged school closures shows that such disruptions can set a generation of children back. For instance, the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan led to an average of 14 weeks of school closures, putting affected children 1.5 to 2 years behind their peers in other regions.[68] Learning loss during school closures is likely to snowball into children falling further behind after they return to school, if the curriculum does not meet them where they are.

Therefore, it is crucial that quick, large-scale and standardized efforts are made to recognize and address the learning gaps across the country. This is especially the case for early grades where solidified foundational skills are essential for any learning progress. Basic literacy levels in language and mathematics need to be assessed and adaptive remedial strategies need to be put in place to address the learning loss and help students catch up. Initiatives such as 'teaching at the right level' and accompanied assessments can be adopted widely to help reduce learning inequalities amongst younger children.

Almost a year after the first school closures in Sri Lanka, there has been an effort to conduct a national survey to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the national education system and plan for learning recovery. This is a positive step in the right direction. The Ministry of Education should supplement this with better continuous monitoring processes and data provided by robust management information systems, as discussed in the next section.

Limitations of Education Management Information System (EMIS)

A productive and effective school system can be created by the effective management of the physical and human resources that have been invested in education. The management of these resources is reliant upon the information to support education planning and decision making. Such information is collected through a well-established and efficient monitoring system that provides comprehensive and real-time data. Education Management Information System (EMIS) is a tool (and processes, increasingly supported by digital technology) which is used to provide timely, cost-effective and user-appropriate information to support educational planning. An EMIS is used to efficiently manage, disseminate and analyse education data, to support education planning and decision making. A well-designed EMIS is essential in establishing a successful monitoring system.

Sri Lanka has developed an EMIS platform. However, the processes around collecting, validating and utilizing standardized information need strengthening. The current monitoring and data collection system wasn't flexible and developed enough to adapt to the dynamic nature of the country's response to COVID-19. The following gaps were identified through stakeholder consultations:

- All schools do not have access to the EMIS platform; provincial-level education officials have access to EMIS.
- An annual school census is conducted in June, where data collected on paper from all schools is uploaded onto the system.
- The use of available data for planning and targeted monitoring at all levels, including by schools, is limited.
- Currently, EMIS does not have information on school infrastructure.
- The EMIS does not collect or record information on learning outcomes.
- There is no reliable data on out-of-school children and children at risk of dropping out.
- There is no fully functional and developed system for monitoring and gathering real-time daily attendance data for students and teachers.[69]
- There is no consensus on the definition of "dropout" and who falls within this category of learners. There are different interpretations and application of the term within the education sector, which differs to how the term is used in other sectors such as child protection.
- There is no link between the education management information system and the health management information system, for example, to consolidate information on student well-being, nutrition and other key health indicators with their education performance data.

Limitations of Human Resource Information System (HRIS)

- The education sector does not have a fully functioning HRIS to monitor teachers and other education personnel.
- Moreover, the HRIS is not linked to the EMIS, making it impossible to examine students' enrollment and transition rates concurrently with that of the career trajectories of teachers and educational staff. This leaves a gap in understanding how teachers and educational staff can be effectively allocated to schools so that they have the greatest impact on learning and enrollment.
- Primary responsibility for human resource management for provincial schools lies with the provincial departments of education and their zonal and divisional offices.
- At the zonal level there is a personal file for each teacher (hard copy) that stores personal details, where they work, salary and qualifications, but this system is not used to identify gaps in teaching resources, professional development, deployment of teachers and performance accountability/incentives, and which schools need additional education personnel for meeting rising enrollments and teaching and learning needs.
- Every year, school principals appraise teacher performance using standardized forms and following written guidelines provided by the MoE and provincial departments of education, but for the vast majority of teachers the exercise is considered perfunctory. Teachers primarily exit the profession into retirement; dismissals are exceedingly rare.
- Promotion is linked to seniority rather than effective teaching and school leadership.
- Currently, teachers are unevenly distributed – a surplus in urban areas and a shortage in rural areas; and a deficiency of teachers in mathematics, science and English.

At present, the MoE in Sri Lanka is in the process of reforming the education management and delivery system. In addition to a curricular reform to be piloted in 2021 and rolled out nationally in 2023, a management reform is also planned with regards to strengthening EMIS and having a fully functional HRIS and Student Information System (SIS). This is a step in the right direction in making the education sector more efficient, equitable, and resilient in the long term. While reform plans are still being drafted and are not in the public domain, lessons learned from the successful coordination and challenges within the monitoring system can add value to the reform planning process.

The following section provides details of those key aspects of a strong education management system currently missing in Sri Lanka, and which are recommended under the reform process.

Strengthening education management systems

The development of an Education Management Information System (EMIS) is but one factor in the successful implementation of a robust EMIS, and nor is it, according to the World Bank,[70] the most expensive aspect of such a system. Yet, typically it receives a disproportionate amount of attention compared to political, organizational, and human resource management factors. EMIS development requires a systematic approach, with political buy-in, consideration of the many different factors and challenges, realistic planning, timeline and budget with long-term sustainability in mind.

In order to have a data management system that can help the Ministry of Education respond more quickly and effectively to emergencies in the future, the following features must be incorporated in the development process and in the system itself. While an extensive review of Sri Lanka's existing EMIS was not undertaken as part of this case study, the features listed below have been derived from international guidelines on EMIS.

Comprehensive overview: Prior to the establishment of an EMIS, the data available at the regional and national level is only a fraction of the total amount of data that is recorded at the school level. Data is also generally disconnected: for example, student data is often kept separate from teacher data. An EMIS should have interlinked records, so that students can be linked not just to their own profile (enrollment, formative and summative assessment outcomes, grades, attendance, etc.) but also to their teachers, their school and corresponding school resources, in the same way that children in household surveys can be linked to their parents and to their households. This enables a much more detailed analysis (such as analysing the link between student dropouts and school characteristics), similar to the types of analysis done for household surveys. In addition, it enables the tracking of students through the education system as they transfer from one school to another. It also allows for the establishment of an early warning system to identify students who are struggling with learning, or those who have been missing school on a continual basis. This integration will therefore enable direct identification and targeting of students who might be at risk of dropping out of school altogether.

The development of an Education Management Information System (EMIS) is but one factor in the successful implementation of a robust EMIS, and nor is it, according to the World Bank,[76] the most expensive aspect of such a system.

People matter: People are an important component of an EMIS[71]. This includes people who operate the EMIS, people who collect, maintain and disseminate the data, and stakeholders at multiple levels who use the EMIS for data analysis, monitoring and decision making. Therefore, the EMIS should not be seen as a solely technical endeavour. While database management, automation and internet connectivity are important aspects of a modern EMIS, these will have little impact without clear guidelines, training, understanding and acceptance by the people who collect, analyze and use the data for decision making.

Incentivize usage: Any EMIS system is only as good as the actionable and useable information it is able to generate. Lack of incentives to enter data into the EMIS at the school level is a key bottleneck.[72] The EMIS needs to offer useful functionality to help with school administration, planning, management, monitoring of students, automated report generation, and so on. In addition, information needs to flow in multiple directions-- both from the school upward to the division, zone and province levels, and downward from the province to the school level. In addition to horizontal flow, there also must also be a vertical flow of information where schools are able to see how they are faring in relation to other schools in the same division. Schools need to be able to see the results of the data they submit, such as being able to see how they compare to other schools in terms of enrollment, characteristics of their students, school funding, examination results, and so on. It is important for schools to have this information, which will provide incentives to upload accurate data on a regular basis. Furthermore, extending coverage of this EMIS system to private schools and encouraging private schools to use the system and provide real-time information is an important mechanism for the monitoring of schools by the Ministry of Education.

Inclusive data collection: An EMIS system must capture in detail disabilities and barriers faced by students in accessing quality education, including the type of learning aids and infrastructure support they require. Each of the identified disabilities, such as vision, hearing, motor, intellectual, communication, behaviour/socialization, needs to be monitored separately as they have a different impact on the ability of a student to participate and learn. In addition to the type of disability, it is equally important to capture the level of functional difficulty in participation and learning.[73] The Washington Group on Disability Statistics has developed a widely-used set of questions for this purpose.[74]

To get a comprehensive overview of who is included in the system, it is equally important to capture who is not being included or at risk of dropping out and why. The EMIS should allow for a) an option to change the status of a student to that of dropout, b) record one or multiple reasons for dropping out. As per the UNICEF Road to EMIS report, in order to track students at risk of dropping out, the following functionality is required from the EMIS:

- Options to create and customize indicators for determining dropout risk based on available student information, such as: low academic achievement in terms of failing grades, chronic absenteeism in terms of days absent, etc.
- Automatically generating a dropout-risk index for each student based on the defined dropout-risk indicators.
- Automatically generating reports which summarize dropout risk details for each student determined to be at risk of dropping out.

Automated and targeted reporting: Once data is collected, automated reporting is required to enable routine monitoring and analysis. With electronic data systems, this process can be automated to a large extent. Different types of reports are required to enable different kinds of analysis and meet different user needs – because each type of user (e.g., teacher, principal, school psychologist, education planner, policymakers, financial analyst, case manager) has different information needs as well as different information presentation needs. Therefore, apart from producing the usual statistical reports with tables and graphs, the EMIS should look at tools to present trends and relationships in the dataset.[75]

Developing a strong, integrated data system that enables real-time monitoring is essential in the context of creating an enabling environment where data-driven decisions are made about students, teachers and education staff, and associated expenditures on education inputs. This is an important first step in the context of current and future school closures and school reopenings and for identifying learning losses as well as students, teachers and education staff who may be at risk of 'exit' from the education system. COVID-19 has brought to light the existing gaps in real-time data on students, teachers and education staff within education systems and is an important impetus for bridging these gaps and for strengthening, unifying and harmonising data and information about the different parts of an education system. An integrated and robust data system will include data from the HRIS on teachers and education staff, as well as data on student learning outcomes to identify gaps in teacher and education staff recruitment and deployment. In addition to information about students' learning outcomes and teachers and education personnel hiring and contracts, this system must also periodically update contact information about students and teachers, and the learning support available at home, should future school closures be necessary. Furthermore, it will also allow authorities to examine teacher and education staff career trajectories and movements between and across schools, if any. Formative and summative assessment data on students' learning outcomes will enable a better understanding of learning losses as a result of school closures and also pave the way forward for designing and implementing subsequent remediation strategies that teachers might adopt in their teaching.

Developing a multi-year monitoring strategy that focuses not just on creating an EMIS, but also its subsequent uptake, usage, and familiarity with the system among education actors at different levels, is key to adaptive management and in using data to generate timely and actionable information and evidence. In the future, this integrated EMIS may also support the development of a fully unified data system that, when relevant, links with other data systems created by the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior/Home Affairs, etc.

04

Recommendations

4.1 Recommendations for increasing resilience to future shocks

The recommendations below have been developed from a desk study of key documents and discussions with stakeholders from the Ministry of Education at different levels, health officials, teachers, and principals. They have been identified based on current gaps in the education system which can be addressed through the ongoing education reform process to further strengthen the education system in Sri Lanka.

Recommendation1: Evaluate the COVID-19 response

While the Government of Sri Lanka efficiently managed the school closure and safe reopening process, little is yet known about the impact of this process on the learning outcomes and development of school-going children. Even as individual provinces are attempting to gather this information, a large-scale national evaluation needs to be conducted to inform policymaking in the short term and build resilience in the long term.

- Evaluate the quality of distance learning materials that were used for all grades through all the various mediums such as radio, TV, print and online. Include feedback from content creators, students (with varying experiences such as- urban, rural, children with disabilities, those with limited support at home, etc.), teachers, and parents (especially of younger children who could not self-learn).
- Collect data about the levels of participation for various distance learning modes such as radio, TV, print and online platforms and websites, and level of teacher support.
- Conduct a capacity needs assessment of teachers to support distance or blended learning through the use of technology to address the digital divide among teachers.
- Assess students at all levels to understand the degree of learning loss, paying particular attention to those who are disadvantaged (e.g., children with disabilities, ethnic minority students, students from migrant families, those living in poverty).
- Develop targeted remedial education interventions to allow children who might have fallen behind to catch up in the fastest and most cost-effective manner (methodologies such as 'teaching at the right level' can be further explored and contextualized), including relevant training for teachers.

Recommendation 2: Improving monitoring and data collection systems

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the need for real-time monitoring in order to track the progress and relative effectiveness of the response, and has shown that the existing systems, routines and processes, require further development to manage the following issues:

- **Attendance:** Systematically track absenteeism as a way to detect and prevent dropout rates, in a standardized way across all public schools in the country, from pre-primary to tertiary (note: that this would have a positive impact on completion, transition and, therefore, on SDG4 targets).
- **Learning:** The burden of school closures weighs heaviest on the most disadvantaged who were not able to study and learn during closures due to lack of access to alternative modalities of distance learning. Without a system in place to measure learning regularly, and record learning outcomes, it is impossible to have a comprehensive overview of the impact of the pandemic on the quality of education and how it translates into skills acquisition in children. Not measuring outcomes also comes with the risk of quality learning not being adequately prioritized. Therefore, the Sri Lankan education sector must regularly measure, monitor, record and analyse learning to assess learning loss and develop a plan for adapted remedial strategies that would cater to the most vulnerable.
- **Infrastructure development and expenditure tracking:** WASH in schools and IPC are the first immediate priorities, but there are other standard operating procedures which require support, resources, and tracking. It is essential to track implementation and spending to be able to course correct and assign additional support where needed. At present, decision-makers have no sight of budgetary issues as there is no comprehensive system that records this in a systematic way. This results in a lack of accountability and lack of responsiveness in the system.

It is recommended that the above three issues are addressed first and that the monitoring of attendance and learning level should be prioritized within the ongoing education reform process in Sri Lanka. The overall strengthening of data systems that is required should be sequenced correctly to respond to immediate needs first, with the long-term goal of integrating data systems in the future.

Recommendation 3: Governance of education monitoring and data

As mentioned above, people are central to the success of any management system. Hence, setting up procedures for governance is important to optimize data use for implementation monitoring and tracking, and to make sure decision making, course correction and adaptation is linked to the use of regularly updated evidence.

The education monitoring reform process must include the following in terms of governance:

- Clear roles and responsibilities with regards to data collection, analysis and dissemination.
- Ensure the safe, ethical and effective management of personal and non-personal data, in line with data responsibility best practice.[77]
- Defined mechanisms for processing, analysing and reporting on the data collected.
- Periodic training for all stakeholders from the monitoring to the decision-making process.
- Reviewing these and other governance processes on a regular basis to ensure efficiency within the system.

4.2 Conclusion

The Government of Sri Lanka has made huge efforts to respond to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Often showcased as a South Asian success story, Sri Lanka has made impressive progress in expanding access to education and health care services. It maintains some of the highest literacy rates in South Asia and the health system is regarded as one of the best performing in the world. Therefore, it is not a surprise that the response to COVID-19 has also been impressive, lessons from which can be adopted by neighbouring countries.

Efficient coordination and collaboration among relevant actors and institutions in response planning and implementation must be applauded. The coordination approach was guided by three key factors: (i) being led by science and evidence, (ii) a participatory, whole-of-government approach to operationalizing the response plan; and (iii) building trust between Government and citizens through strong communications. That the Government and society unified to recognize and fight the pandemic resulted in many efficiencies and benefits including, consistent messages across sectors and joint dispelling of myths; growing trust in the actions of, and information provided by, the Government; less bureaucratic delays and timely, far-reaching actions; sharing of resources and the breakdown of ministry and departmental silos. The whole-of-government approach as discussed in section 3.1 can be replicated in different countries and contexts.

However, there have been shortcomings in the response plan implementation in the education sector, especially with regards to continuous monitoring and data collection to inform evidence-based decision making. Even prior to the pandemic, monitoring and evaluation was an area in need of improvement, with little standardization in how data is collected, analysed and used for decision making. From the national and provincial level stakeholder consultations, it can be surmised that monitoring within the education sector was one of the weakest aspects of the management of the response during school closures and once schools had reopened.

Without strong continuous monitoring systems in place, the education sector cannot be agile and quick to adapt and find solutions to the problems raised by the pandemic. Decision-makers also remain partially unaware of the extent to which different levels of the sector have been impacted, invariably leaving some schools, teachers and students unsupported. Having a detailed knowledge of the impact provided by real-time and reliable data also allows decision-makers to adequately invest in the system's recovery.

The case study, based on a desk review and eleven stakeholder consultations (group and individual) with Government officials from central and provincial levels and school representatives from Uva, Central and Eastern province, makes the following recommendations to strengthen the education system and make it resilient against future shocks: (i) comprehensively evaluation the COVID-19 response to understand its impact on the learning and development of all students; (ii) substantially improve education monitoring and data collection processes, systems and procedures, beginning with attendance, learning outcomes and finances; and, finally, (iii) improve the governance processes around education monitoring and data collection by setting clear roles, responsibilities, training, guidelines, etc.

The ongoing education reform process is aligned with the findings and recommendations of this case study and will hopefully take them into consideration.

Annex

Interview plan & participants

Theme 1: Cross-sectoral coordination of the education sector response to COVID-19

NAME	POSITION	DATE AND TIME OF INTERVIEW
Ms. Renuka Peiris	MoE, Director of School Health & Nutrition	Monday 12 October 2020 4:00 pm
Dr. Jayantha Balasooriya	MoE Director of Policy & Planning	Wednesday 20 October 2020 2:00 pm
Dr. Upali M Sedere	State Secretary, State Ministry for Education Reforms, Open Universities and Distance Learning Promotion	Friday 9 October 2020 11am

Theme 2: Monitoring of the education system at the national and subnational level

Part A: Discussion on the national-level monitoring systems and policies, with a focus on the education sector response to COVID-19 and EMIS/TMIS.

NAME OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS	POSITION	DATE AND TIME OF PANEL INTERVIEW
Ms. Lalani Wijesekara	Director of Monitoring, MoE	
Ms. Soma Rathnayake	Director of Primary Education, State Ministry of Women and Child Development, Preschool and Primary Education, School Infrastructure and Education Services	Wednesday 14 October 2020 11:00 am
Dr. Sunil Nawaratne	Director of National Institute of Education	
Mr. G.M. Niel Gunadasa	Additional State Secretary, State Ministry of Education Reforms, Open Universities and Distance Learning Promotion	Tuesday 13 October 2020 1:30 pm

Part B: Panel discussion on the provincial level implementation of the monitoring systems and policies.

NAME OF PROVINCE 1:	NAME OF PARTICIPANTS	POSITION	DATE AND TIME OF PANEL INTERVIEW (LOCAL TIME)
Uva Province	Mr. R.M Ananada	Additional Director of Education, Department of Education, Uva Province	Wednesday 7 October 2020 11:00 am- 1:00 pm
	Mr. R.M.T Nishantha	Deputy Director of Education, Department of Education	
	Mr. S.M.P Bandara	Assistant Director of Education (Planning), Department of Education	
	Mr. B.M.U.B. Basnayaka	Assistant Director of Education – Primary Education, Department of Education	
	Mrs. C.K. Ananda	Assistant Director of Education (UNICEF), Department of Education	

NAME OF PROVINCE 2	NAME PARTICIPANTS	POSITION	DATE AND TIME OF PANEL INTERVIEW
Eastern Province	Mr.M.T.A.Nizam	Provincial Director of Education (PDE)	Thursday 15 October 2020 12:00 pm
	Mr.A.Wijeyananthamoorthy	Additional Provincial Director of Education (APDE)	
	Mr.P.Kaptheepan	Deputy Director (Planning)	
	Mr.R.Nimalarajan	Deputy Director (Development)	
	Mr.S.Saheed	Assistant Director (Development)	
	Mr.T.Partheepan	Primary ADE	

Part C: Individual interview with the Secretary of Provincial Ministry of Education, Uva province, to get an overall sense of monitoring and coordination at the subnational level.

NAME OF PARTICIPANTS	POSITION	DATE AND TIME OF PANEL INTERVIEW (LOCAL TIME)
Mrs G.A.M.S.P Ambanwala	Secretary of Provincial Ministry of Education, Uva Province	Wednesday 7 October 2020 09:30 – 10:30am
Mr. D.M Samarasekara	Director of Planning, Provincial Ministry of Education, Uva Province	
Mr. H.M.S.T Sampath	Assistant Director of Planning, Provincial Ministry of Education, Uva Province	
Mr. Chandrasiri Dessanayake	Director of Early Childhood Development Authority, Uva Province	

Theme 1 and 2 combined for school-level consultation

NAME OF SCHOOL	NAME OF PARTICIPANT	POSITION	DATE
Ginigathena Central College, Uva Province	Mr. Upul Indrajith	Principal	Friday 18 September 2020
	Mrs. Gayani Wickramasinghe	Vice principal	
	Mr.D.W.Chanaka	Teacher (IT & English)	
	Mr. K.M Sanjeewa	Teacher	
	Mr.M.G Madugoda	Teacher	
	Mr. T.M Nishantha	Member of OBA	
	Mrs. Dayani	Parent	
	Ms. L.A.V Davindya	Student	
	Ms. W.D Narmada	Student	

UNICEF Sri Lanka team supporting this case study

Takaho Fukami	Chief of Education	UNICEF Sri Lanka	Focal Point (overall/national-level)
Sugath Adikaram	Education Officer	UNICEF Sri Lanka (Badulla)	Focal Point (Uva Province)
Nifal Alawdeen	Education Officer	UNICEF Sri Lanka (Battilcaloa)	Focal Point (Eastern Province)
Louise Moreira Daniels	Chief Social Policy	UNICEF Sri Lanka	Consultation
Safina Abdulloeva	CSD Manager	UNICEF Sri Lanka	Consultation
Dhammica Rowel	Health and Nutrition Officer	UNICEF Sri Lanka	Consultation
Nilusha Lakmali Patabendi Hetti Thanthri Patabendige Dona	WASH Specialist	UNICEF Sri Lanka	Consultation

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Sri Lanka Case Study

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This report reviews the impacts of and responses to COVID-19 on education in Sri Lanka, provides reflections on lessons learned so far in the Sri Lanka's COVID-19 response, and analyzes capacity gaps for recovery. It articulates the successful aspects of Government coordination in the response, and identifies opportunities to strengthen data monitoring, as well as the capacity to analyze and use evidence to inform and guide a more agile and targeted response at local and school level.

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