

# Considering the Feasibility of Online Education for Students in Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) during the COVID-19 Pandemic

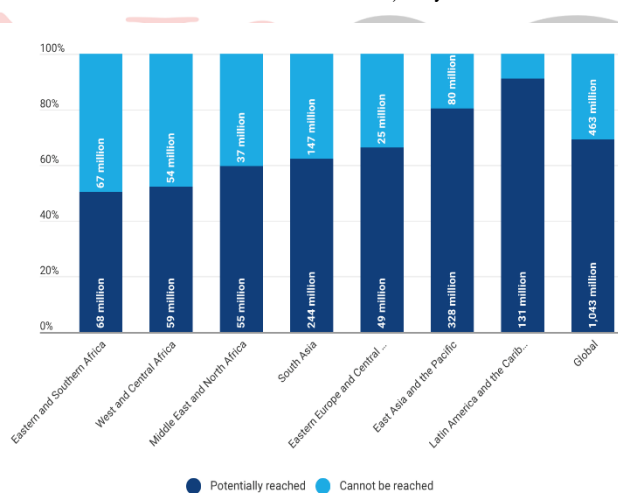
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## Introduction

More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs) and the Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) were equally unable to avoid the vast implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Among the numerous aftermaths, education was also critically targeted by the Pandemic. Education is a fundamental component in life that serves as a key to individual development, adaptability, and success. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 hindered the students from receiving this formal education. The deterrence was overcome by implementing Online Learning systems within nations; however, not all countries could perform accordingly. The Less Economically Developed Countries faced immense difficulties, majorly with

provisioning its citizens with Online Education due to various limitations, as they experience deficiencies in capital and electronic devices. Pursuing a new model of the education system or endeavoring to restore the formal face-to-face education system may be the question of the LEDCs, but these measures also contain massive outliers. Thus, the overall feasibility of online education for students in less economically developed countries during the COVID-19 Pandemic must be considered by all nations to aid the LEDCs in need promptly.



*Percentages and number of students that cannot be reached by digital and broadcast remote learning*

## Background

As direct contact between students and teachers were hindered or reduced due to schools' closures or the country's lockdown, delivering insightful information to students naturally became challenging. The ministry of education of individual nations sought measures to combat this unfortunate situation by realizing a potential solution: technology usage. Technology is considered a vital tool for extensive and engaging learning over countries. It is an especially significant factor during COVID-19 due to its benefit in providing a similar quality of education via online lectures, articles, and games. Specific cases of technology usage in education are media organizations such as the BBC powering virtual learning, targeted for kids across the

U.K. The Ministry of Education in China partnered with its Ministry of Industry and Information Technology to mobilize all major telecom service providers to boost internet connectivity service for online education, especially for the under-served regions. Furthermore, they have decided to foster the upgraded major online education service platforms, especially promoting the National Cloud Platform for Education Resources and Public Service to serve millions of visitors simultaneously. They further initiated plans to adopt flexible and suitable measures to facilitate learning via advising schools and teachers to determine sufficient delivery modes based on local e-readiness, including online platforms, digitalized T.V.s, or mobile Apps. Teachers can receive guidance on teaching methodologies, through live streaming of online tutorials. Finally, China endeavoured to enhance its online security by collaborating with the telecom sector and online platform service providers to receive an education without disrupting by abrupt or permanent internet disconnections.



*China's National Cloud-Platform for Educational Resources and Public Service website*

Despite these successful initiatives of MEDCs globally, the adequacy of online education for students is mostly debatable among the analysts and critics. The difficulty in delivering practical and clinical work that requires active communication between students and teachers is the limitation of online learning. Clear communication is a necessary component in learning as it guides the students to broaden their scope and deepen their thought process. Besides, communication can provide regular or immediate feedback about a particular work which helps the learners to confirm their understanding of the course, correct their mistakes, and build their studies from the point. Online learning hinders the students from practicing such productive sessions; thus, the deterrence of students' learning process prevails with the lack of face-to-face education. Along with such critical limitations, students' integrity during online study cannot be guaranteed. While some students do participate honestly in their academic online courses, some students don't do so. Some take advantage of the environment that they were situated in and choose not to perform with integrity.

However, the validity regarding the content and the online education system's structure may not be a severe problem for some countries. Less Economically Developed Countries are struggling to primarily implement an online education system and seek measures to spread it widely for the practical usage of the citizens. According to United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF's) data, nearly 9 out of 10 of the young people who live in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific have no internet access. These areas embody a vast majority of the LEDCs, proving the presence of the digital divide. In Bangladesh and Zimbabwe, fewer than 1 in 20 children under 15 uses the internet. People in Cameroon, Malawi, and Zimbabwe, where data costs are not as high compared to the prior nations, still face challenges accessing the internet. Therefore, in these countries, the government nor the local corporation is capable of providing its youth with sufficient online education programs as accessing the internet is a significant challenge.

A lack of educational support and qualified teachers is also accountable for creating a debate on whether online education is feasible for the LEDCs. The deficiency of resources, including human capital, is a serious problem in LEDCs. Hence, the number of teachers that can

provide students with online learning experience may be insufficient. For brighter future, the students should receive a thorough education regardless of the circumstance. To appropriately provide learning opportunities for students in need, the feasibility of online education in LEDCs must be reconsidered in depth.

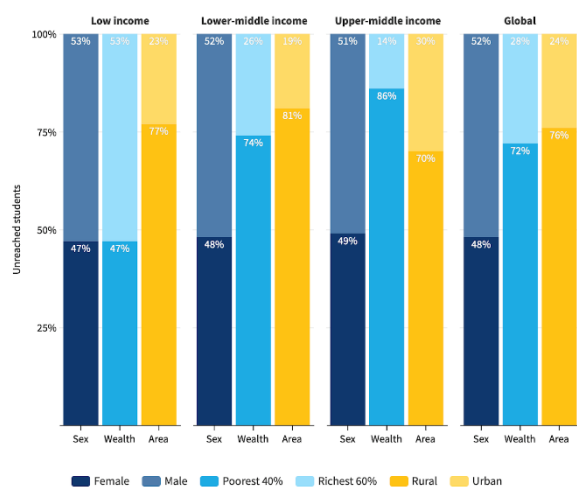
## Problems Raised

### *Lack of Internet Access and Electronic Devices*

As mentioned earlier, nearly 9 out of 10 of the young people who live in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific have no internet access. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, only 47% of developing countries used the internet, while 86% of the population of developed countries had access to the internet. Complying to the reality, the Chair in Culture of Peace and Education at the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja (Ecuador) stated, "at least 60 percent of the student population has been affected by the Pandemic and as many do not have the means or the instruments to access online teaching. Given that COVID-19 is having an immense impact on students, timely responses are needed."

As the chair alludes, lack of internet access deprives the students' learning opportunities, especially during the time of COVID-19. Electronic devices are usually regarded as effective supplements that boost the students' understanding of the material and guide extracurricular learning. However, the outbreak of Covid-19 transforms the ordinary education norm, utterly: the strict lockdown policies cause schools to close down, leading them to facilitate inevitable home-based learning systems that increase the reliance on electronic devices. However, LEDCs that face difficulties in ensuring their citizens to have access to the internet and electronic devices through distributing netbooks and tablets are incapable of providing education to those in need. The primary reason for such implication is that network fees are too high for the citizens to afford as the network connection is exceptionally difficult in these regions. Hence, they have no choice but to renounce their will to purchase devices for education.

### *Digital Divide Within the Nation*



*Percentages and number of students that cannot be reached by remote learning opportunities according to sex, wealth, and area*

Digital Divide is a severe problem experienced among the citizens living in rural and underprivileged urban areas and those experiencing distinguished wealth status. In such undeveloped areas, people struggle to access Information & Communications Technology (ICT) platforms compared to those in the more privileged urban regions, ultimately increasing the unequal distribution of learning. Moreover, distinguished wealth status due to poverty, income inequality, housing, and education discrimination, generates a grave digital divide.

The digital divide also creates unfair competitions between students.

Despite the problem being prevalent before the Pandemic, COVID-19 reinforces the reality of unfair distribution of educational opportunities. Some students may have no difficulty accessing the available education prevalent online, but others have trouble doing so. Thus, this unfair distribution leads to the rise of societal inequality and chaos as education level is highly responsible for ensuring better future for individuals. Education can alter one's inherent wealth status, but the unequal distribution will fail to provide this chance. Hence, the endless cycle of poverty and inequality persists, which does not benefit the nation's development. The issue must be addressed promptly so that the prospects of the individuals and the country is guaranteed.

### *Misallocation of Governmental Support*

Any type of governmental support, such as subsidization, is beneficial for the nations as they successfully close the financial gaps and leakages within each country. However, LEDCs cannot effectively provide financial support to the education sector, despite the current drastic circumstances that hinder face-to-face classes from taking place. To promote access to the internet and electronic devices, the government must subsidize its nation according to each region's situation and individual's wealth status. Government should keep in mind that even though supporting health care and the economy (grants, loans, lowering of taxes, trade) is significant, education also plays a critical role in assuring sustainable economic development. Thus, government's reallocation of funding is necessary for LEDCs to implement online education system effectively.

### **International Actions**

#### *The Flipped Classroom Theory*

The Flipped Classroom theory is a pedagogical approach in which basic concepts of the materials are provided prior to class so that class time can be utilized more efficiently to review and apply concepts. The theory emphasizes its potentials of effectually engaging students in the learning process by creating a long and rich memory. Through pre-learning the concepts, in-class activities can be more application and evidence-based, which allows teachers to give further evaluation and feedback. With the long-lasting Pandemic, numerous MEDCs such as the U.S., the U.K., and China adopted this theory in hand. Nations encouraged the teachers to record their corresponding lectures in advance and upload them to online platforms for students to see, ensuring that students receive a similar quality of education as if they were in a physical class. Through emails and online meetings, students may ask questions regarding the content and receive feedback on their work. However, this theory only applies to the MEDCs capable of accessing the lectures via



*UNICEF's Support for Radio Education in Ethiopia*

their devices. LEDCs that lack resources are incapable of practicing the theory. Therefore, LEDCs must consider how they will ensure every children's learning takes place and implement the theory shrewdly.

### *UNICEF's Support for Home Based Distance Education*

UNICEF provided numerous technical and educational support in LEDCs to alleviate issues such as the lack of internet and devices, misallocation of budgets, and the digital divide. In Gambella, UNICEF provisioned technical support in training 37 radio scriptwriters to develop radio learning materials. UNICEF organized lessons and languages common across regions and promoted cross-regional sharing of resources for broadcasting. UNICEF also secured more than 20,000 solar-powered radios with USB capability to upload lessons for vulnerable learners, including internally displaced children and refugees. By 2021, the Learning Unlimited initiative by UNICEF, Generation Unlimited, and its partners endeavors to allow 500 million learners in 106 countries to have internet access and facilitate high quality IT enabled learning solutions that meet. These contributions from UNICEF will provide significant support for the LEDCs that still require alterations in their online education system during COVID-19.

## **Places of High Concern**

### *Bangladesh*

Bangladesh is one of the nations that severely lacks a sufficient online education system for COVID-19. South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM) showed that 43.90 percent of the students' families could fall victim to poverty (for primary: 51.70 percent, secondary: 42.40 percent; SSC/HSC: 30.20 percent; and university: 19.0 percent), forcing 7.70 million additional students' families to enter poverty. Various factors are responsible for creating poverty, but insufficient education is also responsible for the cause. Moreover, as a cynical coping strategy, students from unprivileged families who are unable to receive an education are likely to drop out for good. This decision generates negative results such as higher rate of child marriage, early pregnancy, and child labor. Students must be able to receive proper education online, during the time of Pandemic, to prevent such results. However, in his budget speech, the Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal pointed out that 40 million students cannot continue regular academic curriculums across Bangladesh. The latest 2020 data of HIES (Household Income and Expenditure Survey) showed that around 12.70 percent of low-income families do not have a single mobile phone. This data illustrates that students who lack access to education and electronic devices will eventually lack the opportunities to receive online education. The government of Bangladesh must take immediate actions to resolve the issue.

### *Ethiopia*

Online education cannot be replaced for face-to-face learning in bricks and mortar classrooms in Ethiopia. Although the Federal Ministry of Education (MOE), which is in charge of provisioning secondary education, created a T.V. channel for education, the program was not designed for students to learn it individually at home.



*Ethiopian students receiving limited online education*

Instead, it was devised to guide the teachers to better prepare for their classes. Thus, the idea of a 30 minutes long T.V. program replacing the full lesson in school settings is considered absurd. Besides, electricity can be infrequent, and internet connection is often unstable at individual's home. Hence, the feasibility of online education in Ethiopia is questioned here again. Moreover, online education lacks additional benefits brought in schools, such as meals, recreational programs, co-curricular activities, pedagogical support by teachers, and emotional and social connections with other children. This deficiency is crucial for the children living in the LEDCs such as Ethiopia, because these activities enable them to fulfill the areas that are not adequately provisioned in their family-sphere. For instance, as parents spend long hours working to deviate from poverty, communication may lack within family, degrading the sense of intense emotional connection. Therefore, there must be an effort to strengthen distance learning in longer-term so that Ethiopia can have a more flexible, resilient, and responsive education system. There should be more significant investments in online education to enable students to access coursework from home in the future. This is important not only so that Ethiopia is better prepared in similar disruptions, but also because "blended learning" – attaining education via various media – can benefit children in ordinary days.

### **Possible Solutions**

As the cause requires serious attention for the development of self and the nations, prompt actions must be taken to help the students living in the LEDCs. Among the numerous solutions that can be proposed for these issues, these are just a few:

1. Increase cooperation between NGOs and the individual nations for financial support.
  - a. As the governmental budget's misallocation is one of the causes for the unfeasibility of online education in LEDCs, NGOs such as Junior Achievement should provide primary financial support and hint the ways to effectively manage the budget for the education sector. The financial aid would not be permanent, so the NGOs should further encourage them to enforce the measures to redistribute their budget.
2. Analyze places of deep concerns on a national level to resolve the issue effectively.
  - a. Different places in the nation may undergo challenges to a distinguished extent. Thus, the government should realize which regions within their nation face the most significant challenges, such as poverty and the digital divide, then prioritize that region for support and encouragement.
3. Alert the reasons for the need of online education during COVID-19.

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- a. Nations that are incapable of providing overarching education during COVID-19 should realize the phenomenal loss and hazards that the students will face in the future. Thus, UNICEF, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and Save the Children must inform the individual nations through means such as mass media to illuminate the leaders and initiate effective education systems.

### **Glossary**

**More Economically Developed Country (MEDC):** More Economically Developed Country is a term that refers to a country that has developed its economy and advanced technological infrastructure relative to other less developed countries.

**Less Economically Developed Country (LEDC):** Less Economically Developed Country is a term that explains the nations with the lowest socioeconomic development, with relatively low Human Development Index ratings compared to the other nations.

**United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF):** United Nations Children's Fund is a United Nations agency responsible for providing humanitarian and developmental aid to children worldwide.

**Junior Achievement:** Global non-profit youth organization founded in 1919 by Horace A. Moses, Theodore Vail, and Winthrop M. Crane. JA works with local businesses, schools, and organizations to deliver experiential learning programs in the areas of work readiness, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship to students from ages 5 to 25.

**Digital Divide:** Digital divide explains the gap between the population or regions with access to modern technology and those that do not or have limited access.

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