



## AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF THE CURRENT ECONOMIC DOWNTURN ON INSTITUTIONALIZED CHILDREN'S EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

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### Abstract

The current socio-economic instability of the country has had a significant psychological impact on individuals, particularly those belonging to vulnerable groups such as alternative care. Hence, this study was intended to examine the impacts of the current economic downturn on children in alternative care. The study used a qualitative methodology using a grounded theory approach, including interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 40, institutionalized children and 8 care givers, were considered as the sample. Education, social relationships, public examinations, school dropouts, and emotional status were the highly affected components which could have adverse long-term effects on child development due to the current situation in the country. Although there is evidence that children become accustomed to a pattern of self-directed learning, gardening, and other creative activities, the study found that activities such as the lack of adequate facilities for online education and the need to stay close to loved ones inevitably affect their psychosocial development. The study recommends a smaller size of institutional care to fulfil the additional needs and systemic change are dire needs of policy practice in alternative care. The study proposed developing a systematic methodology in collaboration with institutions and schools to improve education, particularly the missing parts of the syllabus during online education.

**Keywords:** *Economic downturn, Education, Emotional impact*

### 1. Introduction

Sri Lanka's current crisis is by far the most devastating crisis the country has faced since its independence in 1948. The lack of foreign currency has led the country to struggle to import and pay for essential commodities like fuel, food, and medicine. These challenges have led to cuts in electricity generation, with limited electricity during the day, and long queues outside fuel stations, resulting in violence and even deaths. Prices of essential commodities are skyrocketing, and essential services like water, electricity, and medical care have been hit. Sri Lanka is facing one of its worst economic crises in recent decades, with alarming inflation, weak government finances, and COVID-19 wreaking havoc on the economy. Vulnerable children and families are hard hit, with food, education, and fuel in short supply. How this situation affects institutionalized children is more serious than how it affects other children in the country because their way of life is accustomed to an institutionalized system and their resources are very limited. Institutions in Sri Lanka are anxious as they do not have a way of managing their budgets. With regard to the limited budget they have, institutions cannot accommodate generations, and it definitely affects children's education. This economic downturn has had not only a negative economic impact but also



a psychosocial and educational impact on many families and vulnerable people, such as institutionalized children. Many institutions run with low budgets but with a large number of children in them. With regard to the lack of resources they have, children can not opt for education the way other children do in the country. It has led to these children's being school dropouts, failures in exams, fearing for their futures etc. Therefore, this study is intended to examine the educational impact and long-term consequences of the country's current economic downturn on the institutionalized children.

## **2. Methodology**

The methodology was grounded in a grounded theory approach under qualitative methodology. The data for the impact assessment was obtained from institutionalized children in voluntary homes, caregivers, and key informants from four districts. The majority of the data was gathered through focus group discussions (FGD) with children aged 12 to 14 and 15 to 18, as well as caregivers and service providers. Key informant interviews with managers and administrators were also conducted. The methodology for the survey focused on a sample of 40 children and eight key informant interviewers in voluntary homes. Data was analyzed through grounded theory, and a strength-based approach was used throughout the impact assessment without using stigmatized words.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

The education of children through the traditional system of attending schools shifted to online on an untested and unprecedented scale due to the pandemic. School children who were not properly assessed are also moving online, with a lot of trial and error and uncertainty for everyone. These nationwide closures are impacting almost 70% of the world's student population (Pawana Devi 2021).

The most significant fact is that children have recently shifted from online education to school education due to the COVID-19 pandemic's school closures, but unfortunately, they couldn't continue it with the rise of the economic crisis in the country. The government had to close schools again and send children to online education due to the inability to meet the oil subsidy required for public transport. Childcare institutions struggled to cope with the change and struggled to facilitate children's learning by providing the required devices and data connectivity. A limited number of mobile phones, tablets, and computers were not sufficient to cater to the online requirements as children in care homes do attend multiple schools and grades.

With regard to the data analysis, children expressed their mixed feelings towards online education. The children missed their school and school friends. They did receive assistance from caregivers and peers to complete their homework. Children were able to learn and utilize TV channels of national educational programs, E-thaksala, Gurugedara, and private initiatives on DP education during this period, but those who were getting ready to face the government examinations such as Ordinary Level and Advance Level stated these systems were not sufficient for them as they do provide a platform for them to clarify their issues arising while learning. It is also significant that power cuts and transportation issues have increased their burden as they cannot study in the evening and can not attend the tuition classes.

Through school education, children do not simply acquire book knowledge. Going beyond that, the whole developmental process of children takes place through it. It is important to note that children in some



institutional care have missed out on much of their education because they did not have access to online education. Regarding that, children are now in a more difficult situation because when they get back to school from time to time, the school has covered most of the curriculum, so children have to go through the current curriculum and also cover the missed curriculum. Due to this, education has become a burden for some children.

*“We have only two phones to the institution and there are 26 children, so we missed the online education”, “we couldn’t understand what teachers taught us from online because we were unable to ask questions”, “Now what we are doing at the school is completing our school notes books”,*

*“we got 6 computers very recently but they were also not fixed yet”, “*

**-Children from Institutional care-**

*“We wonder what our O/L and A/L children would do because they seriously saying miss their education” “children miss not only education but the social interaction too, with that, they became so rigid sometimes”*

**-Caregivers from the institutional care-**

The critical factors realized in the analysis of this data and the attention of the competent authorities are that the majority of institutionalized children have developed less interest in education, they are afraid of public examinations and, due to that, they are eager to drop out of school. On the other hand, it was also revealed that some children in private voluntary homes have moved to self-directed learning with the support of the conducive environment they live in. The results showed that the difficulties arising due to the fuel crisis are a crucial factor that undermines children's educational and emotional well-being. Lack of parental visits also impacts on children's behavioral and emotional problems.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The risk of children dropping out of schools, exam phobia, and lack of parental visits has worsened the children's condition, leaving adverse effects on child development. Mostly in institutional care, caregivers had to prioritize the allocation of available devices to students who needed to sit for public examinations, leaving the other children with no devices to attend classes, prompting the need for catch-up classes. The study recommends advocacy for schools to develop specialized service plans and timetables for assessing children at different levels and facilitating small group catch-up classes in collaboration with alternative care systems for building gatekeeping mechanisms for school dropouts. Moreover, it could be suggested that the school social workers' assistance could be taken to address the issues of the children and also to work as mediators between the school and the alternative care system.

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