

Models of Innovation: Education in South Asia

Webinar Transcript

In this interactive session, four organizations will showcase their innovative models of education delivery in times of the pandemic. These success stories, from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan, bring together learning from all corners of the region and illustrate how the shared challenge of quality and access can be mitigated through partnership, research, and resilience.

Moderator

- **Emmerich Davies**, Assistant Professor of Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Speakers

- **Ayaz Aziz**, Manager (Online Education), Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center
- **Nishant Pandey**, CEO, American India Foundation
- **Rumeen Singh**, Founder, Katha4Nepal
- **Haroon Yasin**, Co-founder and CEO, Orenda

BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION:

Sanjay Kumar: Hello and welcome to today's seminar on 'Models of Innovation: Education in South Asia.' I'm Sanjay Kumar, the India Country Director of the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute at Harvard University. The mission of the institute is to engage through interdisciplinary research to advance and deepen the understanding of critical issues relevant to Southeast Asia and its relationship with the world. As part of this engagement, the Mittal Institute hosts a multitude of events covering topics in the arts, humanities, sciences education, business and more. We are so glad you joined us today, and please consider joining us for our upcoming seminars.

A couple of housekeeping items for today, today's session will be recorded. During the question and answer session, you can submit questions directly to moderators via the Q&A function on Zoom. Due to the large number of attendees at today's seminar, we unfortunately will not be able to cover all questions. There will be a short survey automatically sent to you at the end of the session, we would ask that you kindly fill this out.

Without further ado, I would like to introduce the moderator of today's session, Professor Emmerich Davies.

Emmerich Davies is an Assistant Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. A faculty associate at the Weatherhead Centre for International Affairs and Center for International Development, and a co-convenor of the Brown, Harvard, MIT joint seminar on South Asian politics. Emmerich Davies specializes in education policy and politics, the political economy of development, and the politics of service provision with a regional focus on South Asia. His dissertation, for which he was awarded the National Academy of Education Spencer Dissertation Fellowship examines the growth of private elementary education in India and the consequences of using private rather than public schools on individuals' beliefs and civic engagement. Thank you for being with us today Emmerich. Handing over to you.

Emmerich Davies: Thank you, Sanjay, for that introduction and for bringing us all together. Thank you, all of you in the audience for joining us this evening or wherever you may be in the world. As Sanjay said, my name is Emmerich Davies and I am an Assistant Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where most of my work is focused on education in South Asia. So, as a result, I'm very excited to be moderating this panel today on models of innovation in education in South Asia.

We have organizations that represent four of the countries from SAARC, The Orenda Project from Pakistan, the American Indian Foundation (AIF) from India, Katha4Nepal, and the Bangladesh Youth Learning Center. We're going to begin with short videos from the four organizations, and before we started the webinar, we were discussing backstage that it's really nice to be able to have this opportunity to learn from other

organizations from within South Asia, where normally most of our lessons come from outside of the South Asian context.

Before we start with the videos, I wanted to introduce the four organizations, and the four participants that you will be hearing for from in greater detail in just a second. So, from The Orenda Project, we have Haroon Yasin, who is the Co-founder and CEO of The Orenda Project, an educational tech company that creates content for children. Haroon is a teacher and educational entrepreneur in Pakistan, and he founded The Orenda Project in 2015 to provide high quality, engaging education to every child. Orenda digitized Pakistan's national curriculum and developed Taleemabad, which you're going to hear about a little bit more in just a second. A mobile and web application that helps out of school children resume their studies. With his Malala Fund Grant, Haroon expanded Taleemabad curriculum to include secondary education. He trains teachers, community groups and district officials to use Taleemabad and reach even more out of school girls.

From AIF, we have the CEO of AIF joining us, Nishant Pandey. In his capacity as CEO, he provides strategic leadership to AIF's operation spanning the US and India. He began his career as a banker, but thankfully we were able to recover him back to the development sector. He's previously worked at Oxfam as a program officer for South India, where he designed and developed value chain programs on the themes of powers in markets before moving to Oxfam's global headquarters in Oxford, leading program development in 12 countries. And before moving back to India as AIF's Country Director, Nishant was based in Jerusalem where he had one of his most complex and challenging assignments as Oxfam's Country Director for the occupied Palestinian territories in Israel.

From Katha4Nepal, we have Rumees Singh, who is the Founder of Katha4Nepal, a platform for kids to engage and learn through stories and also for parents to relax and help comfort their kids. Rumees has successfully led and managed education programs, including financial literacy programs, featuring Warren Buffett and programs for Intel and Disney. She has also worked with PepsiCo in the global communication team at New York, led PepsiCo consumer relations in Dubai before moving back to Nepal. She has a diverse background in corporate communication, journalism, writing, education, and engineering.

And finally, from BYLCx, Ayaz Aziz, who's the manager of BYLCx, an online learning academy. He's leading BYLCx efforts to democratize 21st century skills training for Bangladeshi youth by making meaningful online learning experiences available from anywhere, anytime. Ayaz is involved in rethinking youth, education and training, engaging experts to develop content, and building a platform to make this content available on a mass scale.

I'm going to stop here and without further ado, I want to introduce the videos that we will be watching before opening up for a Q&A.

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Rumees Singh: Stories are fantastic learning platforms to capture a young child's attention and to fuel their curiosity and thinking ability. As a mother of two young children, I have always relied on read-alouds to bond with my kids and also to introduce them to their imagination and creative potential.

The onset of Covid-19 has ended up in school closures and almost no physical interaction for young minds. Stories now have become more important than ever before. Many children in Nepal have limited access to storybooks as they stay home during the pandemic, Katha4Nepal was born in response to these challenges. Our social initiative is a platform for children to hear stories and continue learning at home.

Rupa Dixit Joshi: I love storytelling, I love to tell stories, and specially reading aloud, especially the little ones you cannot read by themselves, because with your experience, with what you've seen and heard and worked, you can bring it all out as the story demands. It really gets them to think and makes them enjoy storytelling and it gets ingrained in little brains. Especially in Nepal, where there's a shortage of books per se, let alone library books or whatever, it's really important that we have programs whether it's online or through the radio, where you can read aloud.

We have people from various backgrounds who read children's stories in English, Nepali and local dialects. The platform has grown and adapted to be community-driven, where a number of enthusiastic storytellers share read-alouds and help reach a wider audience.

Subhana Shrestha: We have also collaborated with some schools and online learning platforms to conduct interactive storytelling sessions. We recently conducted the session on environment, blood donation and

cleanliness with kids and they're amazingly engaging.

William wanted a dog. He wanted to hug it and cradle it in his arms.

At Katha4Nepal, we curate content and partner with various publishing houses, organizations, and influencers to push a diverse range of stories. From mental health awareness to sexuality and culture identity based read alouds, we are focused on sharing empowering, inspiring, and educational children's stories.

Niranjan Kunwar: Katha4Nepal started in a very broad way to just get students to read stories and get adults to read stories to students. We are now thinking of curating certain books, we can plan lesson plans around read aloud, we can plan units of studies. So there's a lot of potential. Our reactions from parents have also been very warm and encouraging.

I love to listen to new stories all the time, they're so cool. I enjoy all the stories from Katha4Nepal. Rume Singh: Young children in Nepal have always had limited access to libraries and books with or without a pandemic. Instilling a love for books and cultivating a reading culture is key to drive structural changes in our education system. Katha4Nepal is bringing the joy of reading to young children and parents at home, one book at a time.

Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center:

The challenges facing Bangladesh today are daunting and complex. Taking the country forward requires support of many hands. In a country where almost half the population is below the age of 25, Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center believes that the key to developing lasting solutions lies in nurturing a generation of leaders and change-makers who will take ownership of the issues faced by their communities.

BYLC's journey started in 2008, when a Bangladeshi graduate student at Harvard, Ejaj Ahmad, envisioned a leadership program that would unite youth from diverse backgrounds, equip them with leadership skills, and engage them in active citizenship. Within a span of 12 years, BYLC has transformed from a living room project to one of the most trusted, respected, and sought after youth leadership platforms in Bangladesh.

So, what are the principles that define BYLC's programs. First, we believe in leadership versus authority. Leadership is a process and not a position. BYLC's emphasizes adaptive leadership to find solutions that address core systems, instead of quick fixes. Second, we believe in unity and compassion. Effective leadership requires the capacity to embrace diversity inclusiveness. A cornerstone of BYLC's approach is uniting us from diverse social, economic and educational backgrounds by bringing youth together from three prevailing but fragment education streams in Bangladesh. English medium, Bangla medium, and Madrasa and therefore, teaching them how to work as an inclusive team. Third, we believe in skills and competence. Conventional approaches to education, based on rote memorization have left our youth with critical skill gaps. By focusing on experiential learning methods, BYLC's programs cultivate critical thinking, teamwork and communication skills that are not addressed by conventional education.

Youth employment is a critical issue in Bangladesh, where more than 10% youth are currently unemployed. To address this challenge, BYLC launched its office on professional development in 2016 to provide career guidance and unemployability training, and engage directly with the private sector to understand and disseminate industry needs. With the mission to democratize leadership education and 21st century skills training, BYLC launched its online academy BYLCx in 2017. BYLCx offers online courses and live online workshops to help learners develop career-relevant skills and stay relevant to a workplace that is changing faster than ever before.

Given the severity of Bangladesh's youth unemployment, simply finding jobs may not be sufficient enough and it may well become a necessity in the long term, to create jobs. With the same vision, BYLC Ventures was created to engage Bangladeshi youth and entrepreneurship through training, mentorship, and startup accelerator programs. With the ventures, BYLC has become an important player in Bangladesh's burgeoning startup ecosystem.

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced us all to adapt to challenging circumstances and face an uncertain future. Since a nationwide logged on March 2020, BYLC has moved all its training and engagement activities online and adapted a curriculum for the new normal. In the face of the present difficulties, BYLC's mission and vision remain as relevant as ever: to strengthen prosperity, justice, inclusiveness in societies, and validation around the world.

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Emmerich Davies: Thank you all for these videos, introducing all of us to the very good work that you've been doing in education and innovation, and in education across South Asia, before the Covid-19 pandemic and during.

For the next 30 minutes or so, we will have a discussion between all the participants and right now I'd like to introduce the participants from the organizations that we just saw videos from. We have Haroon Yasin from The Orenda Project, Nishant Pandey from the America India Foundation, Rumeen Singh from Katha4Nepal, and Ayaz Aziz from the Bangladesh Youth Learning Center joining all of us here today.

I will have a couple of questions for the participants before opening it up to a more general Q&A from the audience. So, without further ado, as we get into the Q&A, I wanted to start with the elephant in the room and address Covid specifically. The pandemic has shut schools, forced many of us to work remotely, and changed how we all do our work. For an organization like Orenda, there'll be some significant learning losses after the pandemic, for programs like the learning and migration program, the great migration crisis that was started during Covid has changed residential and school choices as migrants return home, for organizations like Katha4Nepal being home has meant strain on time and finances for parents to engage in program, and for organizations BYLC, the economic contraction from Covid could mean contracted financial opportunities for all participants.

Just to start off, I would love to hear from all four panelists, from all of you, how the pandemic has changed how you do your work and engage with children and young adults across the region. So, Haroon, starting with you as you were the first video that we saw.

Haroon Yasin: Thanks for having us Emmerich. I think one of the things that we've learned the most during the pandemic is the fact that ed tech had a very different perception in Pakistan before the pandemic struck. I think it was for many parents, before the pandemic, we had roughly reached about, and this video is from before the pandemic, we were at 135,000 users. We've now crossed over and are close to 700,000. And I think one of the things that has happened the most is that ed tech and distance learning programs and e-learning programs have turned from a nice to have, to a must have for parents. And one of the things that we've seen so far is that our program primarily targets users from tier two and tier three cities.

And previously, because parents used to be working or because there was only one smartphone in the household, we often used to see Taleemabad being used at the most odd times of the day. Sometimes, at 11 o'clock at night or close to midnight. We always used to wonder and call up the parents and, you know, talk to them about the fact that that was a very strange time for their kid to be learning. And one of the things that we've discovered, before this, all of our marketing, all of our efforts, all of our behavior change was targeted at students, but one of the things that we discovered during this pandemic was that mothers were very key gatekeeper.

As soon as the pandemic struck, we started reaching out to mothers in large numbers through SMS campaigns and through notifications, and started having conversations with them. Using mothers as a gatekeeper and an enabler for the child to learn, we found that Taleemabad now has a very distinct and very different pattern. Even though the lockdown has been lifted in Pakistan, from nine o'clock every morning to about 12 to 1pm in the evenings, if the child isn't going to school or from 1pm to 3pm in the evening that the child is going to school, there is a very structured kind of learning that is happening even through ed tech products.

And we think it is largely due to the fact that parents have now come to realize that this is the new normal or at least the fact that they will have to work with this. We've noticed that young mothers have particularly adjusted well, in the sense, that they know that if they can get their children the appropriate windows within which to learn and to support them, this doesn't require that they sit with their children all the time. But the fact that they're enabling their children to be learning within these times, possibly by sacrificing some of their own screen time, shows there, I think there's there's quite a lot of behaviors that are changing.

So, usage has peaked, behavior patterns among users have changed, parents have started to play a huge role in teaching. As a teacher myself, I think everybody is a teacher. And I think one of the things that we've done is that we've started to enable mothers, started to give them ways in which they can teach their children well. And so, that's been one of the key takeaways. I think even when the lockdown is lifted and you know there will be a time in the near future, when this will be a long distant memory. I think we will still be using some of the same strategies because I think they've told us of some of the most important levers to drive learning outcomes for children and that's within the family of the child.

Emmerich Davies: Nishant, over to you.

Nishant Pandey: Thank you, Emmerich. Well, first of all, I want to thank the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute at Harvard for organizing this very timely and relevant conversation. We are now seven-eight months into the covert crisis and many organizations working on education globally, not just in South Asia have pivoted in these seven, eight months and have a lot of learning on how to make sure that there is continuity in learning for children. So, I think this is a very timely discussion and thank you for inviting me to be a part of this panel.

AIF's learning and migration program, by definition of course, works on education of children from migrant communities. And as you said, one of the biggest stories coming out of India in the Covid time was the migrant crisis because millions and millions of migrant workers decided to move back to their villages. And therefore, the learning and migration program became extremely, extremely crucial in the Covid times.

There are two things, of course, we have seen. One is that Covid has had disproportionately high impact on the underprivileged children, which is obviously the focus of our program, and then it has also kind of in a very stark way exposed the digital divide that exists within India. Just to give you statistics, that are about 1 million public schools in India, in which about 200 million children go every year and only about 20-25% of the schools have computers. And I'm not even going into how well these computers are used. So, there is a huge divide that existed before Covid, but Covid has just exposed it in a dramatic way.

There are three ways in which broadly children's learning in these very underprivileged communities in remote rural parts of India, very underserved communities has happened. One is of course the loss of instructional time in a school setting, leading to efficiency in terms of learning outcomes. The second one is challenges in terms of feature preparedness to support digital learning. So, when we talk about remote learning and digital learning, we focus a lot on the product, on the technology, on the connectivity part and under emphasize the importance of human capital, right. The teachers at the last mile and how well they are equipped and trained to impart digital learning. And, of course, in a context like India, and maybe it is similar in other South Asian countries as well, where schools are also very important source of nutrition because of midday meal schemes and because of school closure, it has an adverse impact on the nutritional security of children.

So, we launched, AIF launched our Covid-19 relief work in late March, focused of course on life-saving interventions like providing ration kits and hygiene kits to underprivileged communities that we work with. But soon we moved to ensuring continuity of education for children, and in these last six months or so, we have worked with more than 30000 children, about 3400 teachers across about 2500 schools. And believe it or not, using more than 2000 youth volunteers, about 45 citizen educators, and more than 1500 WhatsApp groups. And as I think Haroon was saying, it has become more from a, good to have desirable to more essential part of your education world. The use of digital education and as a result, we have now forged partnership, a large partnership and non commercial partnership, with BYJU's, which is world's largest ed-tech firm and with tech companies, like Dell, like IBM, like MasterCard, to make sure that ICT is very well integrated despite the challenges of hardware and software and things like that at the last mile in some of the most remote parts of India.

One last thing I want to mention, I think Haroon touched upon that is, it's very important as we move towards that slightly different model of this community participation. Often, if you look at the mobile penetration statistics, we feel that it's not so much there. But what we have learned through online surveys, is that mobile penetration in rural areas is a very kind of interesting thing where the phone in the family, there's only one phone in the family, but it is shared between five or six members of the family. And when we did a survey, with about 4400 parents across 12 states of India, we found that on an average parents were willing to share their mobile phone with kids for education, for up to two hours. And that helped us design our education intervention for the Covid era. So, lots of new learnings, lots of new insights for us, and we are building on that to figure out the next phase of our programming, education programming, as the crisis continues.

Emmerich Davies: Thank you, Nishant. And now Rume, to hear from your experiences in Nepal.

Rume Singh: Thanks Emmerich. The education system in Nepal depends heavily on traditional ways of teaching and I think Covid, it has really challenged this existing structure and there's just been a huge need for a mindset shift in a resource shift to digital innovation. And as Haroon and Nishant were talking about, while the pandemic has created difficulties in different levels in education sector, it has really forced us to be open to opportunities and be more acceptable to change. So, my organization had started an online learning platform back in 2013 and while it got a lot of attention being something that is novel, but in reality, you know, folks, were just not ready for it.

Now with the pandemic, I feel like parents and teachers are very, very open to new innovative ways and for me, for example, my five-year-old daughter is taking online ballet lessons and my son is learning B-boying online and I would have never, never thought that I would put them up for online classes for dance, specifically. But the pandemic sort of pushed me towards that. And innovation in education I think is more than just using the technology as I think Nishant was also talking about. It's actually, you are solving a real problem in a very, very simple way that could help promote equity and improve learning.

And Katha4Nepal is a very simple idea and I'd just like to add that unlike the other panelists here my organization is fairly new, and it doesn't have a history of really engaging with kids for a long time. But Katha4Nepal was solely started after the lockdown in April, and it's a very simple idea where we're looking at cultivating a reading culture for young children. Nepal still struggles with promoting the concept of reading culture for children and we want to sort of capture the willingness of people for additional media right now and see if we can improve learning.

In addition to this, we've also realized that we could partner with a number of local organizations and also globally to bring in a diverse range of open stories through read-alouds to kids in Nepal. So, you know, we'd be touching representation, talking about marginalized, really touching on marginalized communities as well. So, there are a lot of different local organizations who are doing great work and recently, we did read-aloud for a project with Let's Read Asia, an organization for regional area, where they had launched 20 picture books in Terai language and Tharu is an ethnic group in southern Nepal, and in Northern India. So over all, I feel like the the pandemic has also opened up a lot of opportunities for collaboration and resilience in the way we work together into experimenting new processes to engage children.

Emmerich Davies: Thank you, Rume. And finally, Ayaz, it'd be great to hear lessons from Bangladesh as well.

Ayaz Aziz: Sure thing. Thank you very much for including me in today's discussion. Since nationwide lockdown was introduced back in March, of course, all of our physical classroom activities have ceased, so all our learning programs are now delivered online platforms such as Zoom and other live platforms.

This has exposed issues that we knew previously. A lot of our beneficiaries, since the lockdown, have moved back to their home districts or to their home villages. In fact, accessibility has been a huge problem. So that's a challenge that we need to work on. But we've also been seeing another side of this. Since moving all our training online, we've seen a lot more participation from beneficiaries that are from different parts of the country, who would not be part of our programs before because they were not based in Dhaka. So, this is sort of accelerating an approach that we were taking to delivering our learning before, which is, we are leaning more towards a blended online first method, where more and more of the content is being delivered through online videos with sort of live sessions.

Right now, there would be online sessions, perhaps in the future, we'd go back to physics classes, but we still are looking to shift as much of the content as possible into a video format and reduce the amount of instructor time to increase accessibility. Since we work with professional development, we also sort of changed the content, what we're teaching. So, preparing young people for the future is just going to be very different from how things used to be done. So, preparing young people for online collaboration, working with remote teams and things like that. And the experience of the pandemic has also been a very strong reminder that we need to develop certain traits. So, working on resilience and adaptability, as things continue to be uncertain for a long time, these are things that we are also introducing as core parts of our programs.

Emmerich Davies: Thank you, Ayaz. I wanted to turn our attention to a different lens. And it's, I couldn't help but notice that on a panel of education and innovation in South Asia, all our participants came from the non state sector and from the nonprofit sector and many of the solutions and the pivots that you discussed also rely on the private sector in some form.

So Nishant, you talked about partnerships, partnering with Microsoft. Haroon, you talked about the private solutions that are rooted in bargains within the family. But, I wanted to talk about the states in South Asia, in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and India and what role the public sector had in either supporting, building upon or expanding efforts that, innovations that all of you are making. Do you see some sort of role for the public sector and, if so, what is the role of the public sector in supporting or expanding or building upon the work that all of you are doing? Let's start with Haroon again.

Haroon Yasin: I think one of the most interesting things that we've seen so far is that traditionally ed tech solutions or whatever uses, technology has always been, I think it's been on a low priority for the state sector because some of the reasons that have already been described on this call. Smartphone penetration or

technology penetration continues to be low or was low, up until a few years ago, especially in the communities on which the government focuses. So, at least, in Pakistan, for example, private schools will often exist in a price range, which might be completely inaccessible to the kind of people that the government is focusing most of its attention on, which are out of school children.

And so, I think one of the things that the government has come to realize this time around is that in the pandemic, I think we've really seen how technology has the potential to be used for a wide variety of things and giving you a couple of quick examples. The first is that television has always been the state's medium to disseminate information. Pakistan has a state broadcaster that has over 95% penetration all across the country, even in small towns and villages. It is a free to air terrestrial network, if you have an antenna in any part of Pakistan or a small device, you'd be able to catch it. Most of Pakistan's cricket matches will be streamed on it, most of Pakistan's news about what the new crop disease is and how to avoid it will also be aired on this medium.

I think the government realized when the pandemic hit there was really no other possible way to be reaching these children, and this even surprised us because within the span of, and kudos to the government in Pakistan for doing so, I'm pretty sure Nepal and other governments did the same as well. But within 14 days, not only had Pakistan pulled out all the resources, but it had also launched free to a dedicated TV channel. It had pulled together all the players from the private sector who had contributed content, which was, sequenced and had learning progression built in, and that content started to be aired on national television and went out to an audience of about 10 million children. I think this was about 14 days from the pandemic, that's Blitz speed for state institutions to be acting on something with a sword. But I think what we've seen throughout the pandemic is that states do remain open to the possibility, it is unfortunate that such a scenario might propel action from this state to explore innovative models by which education can be delivered.

I'm not saying that because they broadcast content on national television for eight hours a day that they've solved most of the pressing crisis that Pakistan faces in terms of enrolling out of school children, but I think that one of the things that this has really started off is that it's kicked off a debate about what could be possible. If we can't build 10,000 schools by the next year, what do we need to do in order to get to these children, there might not be TV, that might not be mobile phones, but I think that one of the really interesting things is, whether it's WhatsApp groups or some other things, the state is now becoming open to the possibility that this might be done on a protracted long term basis.

There's already a policy group that has been formed by the government and big donors, like the UNICEF and World Bank are coalescing around this this entire issue. My sincere hope is that once we discover a vaccine and hopefully solve this pandemic for good, that we don't roll back on the fact that we thought about all of this in an innovative fashion, but in fact that we considered all the models that we just discussed in this meeting that there new ways to reach these children. For now, the state seems to be incredibly open, incredibly proactive, almost acting like a startup in terms of how quickly they mobilize. Our hope is that it sustains as well and gets translated into post-pandemic gains too.

Emmerich Davies: That is great to hear that the state in Pakistan has been so open and acting like a startup as you say. Nishant, it'd be great to hear from you about how you see the state across the border and in India.

Nishant Pandey: Absolutely. I think this is a very good and relevant question, certainly for AIF because we work only with the government across our entire education work because the scale and complexity of the challenge that we are trying to address is just so huge that the only way to achieve sustainability and scale is to work with the government.

There are a lot of details here, but we don't have time. So I'll give you a philosophical answer, I think, you know, the civil society organizations, NGOs, like AIF and many others, the big advantage we have is the agility and flexibility. A lot of our resources are unrestricted and that allows us to do innovation, that allows us to bring best practices, that allows us to build the capacity of government teaching community at the last mile, whereas government brings exceptionally high levels of resources and outreach.

So, I kind of don't see this as an NGO versus government kind of equation here. I see it as an ecosystem, where government is a stakeholder, NGOs are a stakeholder, and I would include many other actors, including private sector, for example, right. And I think what we need is to build a culture of dialogue demonstration and documentation and a platform to convene all the stakeholders together. I mean, I was giving you the example of partnership that we have forged with Byju's, which is world's largest ed-tech firm, which will allow us to take Byju's high quality, standardized content in multiple languages to really under

resourced government schools, 10,000 government schools across India. And, so you're basically leveraging government resources, government capacity at the last mile, leveraging resources of the private sector and then using your position to convene these players together.

I think that is the only way to, and I think it's also kind of unfair to say that there is no innovation happening in the government. Within the government, there is a lot of innovation happening in India for example, there is something called as Atal Innovations Lab. I think the challenge is how do you take these innovations from these labs to the last mile in some of the really remote rural parts of India. I think things are significantly better in the larger cities but how do you take them to communities, how do you translate them for a student-friendly experience in communities where you have first generation learners. And so, I think those are kind of challenges that civil society organizations are very well equipped to deal with in partnership with the government.

And there is a lot of receptivity. We have MOUs with multiple state governments in India. Interestingly, the new national education policy in India was actually launched end of July, which is in the middle of a pandemic and that recognizes the use of technology, that also recognizes the role of civil society in education and that also in a very kind of specific way, recognizes the need to invest in education of children of migrant communities in partnership with the civil society, partly because of our input into the policy but partly because of the openness and open mindedness of the government to leverage all resources.

Emmerich Davies: Rume, we'd like to hear from you, from Nepal.

Rume Singh: Sure. I think as Haroon was talking about how Pakistan has really pushed on its state television, in Nepal, there's been some educational radio programs for children and specifically during Covid, which has been a collaboration of non state and state sectors. So, there are some examples of innovation here that have gained some traction and the government is even, I think the Ministry of Education, it started like a web profile where you can download educational resources. The challenge I think is while Nepal has a federal structure now, the center is still in a lot of control. So, we've got a history of nationalized public schools and everything is still very centralized and the local governments have not been able to really shape their education system to that extent, and that's putting a lot of marginalized populations in disadvantage.

And I think that's why there are a lot of non state players who are trying to bridge the gap but I think there's still possibilities of being able to work in the local level. And there are a number of organizations have done some great work here in the local level to introduce different programs in arts, in literature. And I feel like Katha4Nepal for the next step, I feel like we could collaborate with local municipalities to bring learning to read alouds. So, that could reflect cultural or historical stories from that local community. So we can promote their, you know, maybe local language or artists. So I think there's there's definitely a potential.

Emmerich Davies: And finally, Ayaz, it'd be great to hear from you in Bangladesh.

Ayaz Aziz: So, I could actually really relate to Haroon's experience. Here in Bangladesh, almost immediately after lockdown, the government began rallying all the small ed tech startups that we have and start really rushing into producing videos and start being broadcast broadcast on TV immediately.

So it was very quick and was very commendable reaction from the government. And I should say that the Government of Bangladesh, actually always been quite proactive when it comes to pushing for the education agenda. But there are more long term concerns, now one of course, we don't want to see the sort of energy level that we see now during a crisis fade away when things get better. But one of the major concerns at BYLC is with youth unemployment, which was problematic before and it's probably going to be even bigger challenge as you move forward, and economy takes time to recover.

So, BYLC does a lot of programs, work with youth to try and address skill gaps that we see that basically come from the gap in what these young people are, young graduates are learning in university versus what sort of skills that employers require. And basically, what we do is we are constantly in touch with private sector stakeholders, we're constantly trying to stay up to date on what sort of skills are required and what sort of job roles are being difficult to fill, and that's how we design our programs. But this is something that we feel we hope, I'm looking forward to see the government take a much more active role accelerating the dialogue between the private sector and the academic sector so that our curriculum is more market driven demand that instead of lagging behind and reactionary. So, I hope that in the long run the government plays a more important role in sort of bringing the ecosystem together.

It's easier for smaller organizations such as BYLC to innovate because we have a lot, we have a much more smaller organizations with a lot less restrictions. But I think the role of government itself more than just being innovative could be to sort of bring together and empower all the different stakeholders in the ecosystem.

Emmerich Davies: Thank you, Ayaz. I'm going to turn to questions from the audience and and there's been a series of questions that are picking up on a thread that all of you pulled on. Haroon, you discussed working in tier two and tier three cities, Ayaz, you discussed reaching populations outside of Dhaka, and all of you sort of pointed to the problems of last mile service provision. So there are several questions around this. So, I wanted to combine a couple of them and ask what has been most successful in reaching rural students who don't have access to internet or whose internet access might be constrained in some way. What has worked best for your organizations to reach out to students that have poor infrastructure to access content?

Haroon Yasin: Yeah, I think one of the interesting things, I mean, the first answer is pretty clear. We can't rely on smartphones and internet connectivity to reach the last mile. So, that much we've discovered so far. TV has been one way for us to get the ball rolling, but I would stop short of saying that you can get educated, just by watching a TV. If that was true, we would stop our schools and just go to cinemas instead and that would educate us, but it's a hard proposition to sell that TV can do the same things.

One of the things that we're figuring out now is that, and this is again at the end of the day, in quite a whole lot of these places internet would not do the job, foot soldiers will have to do the job. It's called sneaker net or slipper net but you know this has people literally from the last mile that the Internet and devices are available being mobilized to get to these places where the children are and getting the education to them. We were just working in a place in which they were about 200 girls who were out to school for the longest period of time, and no matter how much technology we continue to throw at the problem, I think it doesn't solve it until and unless the communities are involved. Once we got their parents and their mothers and their fathers and some of the leaders in their communities involved and began to also structure our education in such a way that it made tangible difference to them, for example, a question that a lot of times, you know, we'll go on harvests in southern Punjab and we will talk to farmers and we keep asking them, why do you pull your kids out of schools in such large numbers and they keep on giving the most rational answer to us, basic economic theory, they'll say, well, we don't get anything out of it. We'll go to school for 10 years and after that we won't even get a job, so, why should we.

And that's a perfectly legitimate question. I think mass schooling became the norm, studying the same thing, became the norm about a 100 years ago. But before that, you know, head schools or community schools were the norm, and they prepared you to deal with life, how it was in your own village. I think one of the things that Taleemabad has done remarkably well in order to reach these last mile places is, a) It has used people, but the other thing is that when you're learning fractions, you learn fractions in the context of your local mithai shop where you buy your sweets. If you're learning perimeter and area, you learn it in the context of how you can save space for wind-breaking trees that you can plant around your farm to prevent soil erosion, but every bit of knowledge is actionable. You can walk out of the classroom and apply it the next day. I think one of the things that we've always previously tried to do was, we've always pursued a push model of education. Somebody has to wake you up at seven o'clock in the morning and push you to school. You never wake up and go to your mom at seven in the morning and say, I want to go to school today, I just feel like it.

And so, one of the things that we've figured out now is that, it's got to become a pull-model for communities, for students. They've got to see something in it. It's got to be, I think, if it doesn't involve humans, it's not going to work. And I think one of the things, even as an ed tech company, we're realizing now is we're going to get to the goal that we want to get to including it in the last mile, we have to change what we teach and how we teach, make it relevant to the people, and then use people to teach people. No amount of screen time might ever, you know, get around to really relinquishing or finishing that off.

Emmerich Davies: Nishant.

Nishant Pandey: Yeah, I think AIF's learning and migration program works only in remote rural areas because of the the community that it focuses on right. And therefore, all these problems that you're talking about in terms of infrastructure, connectivity, devices we face that. Two overarching things that we have realized in the last seven- eight months, one is that yes, technology is very powerful, it is very enabling but it cannot be seen as a replacement of the school based learning. And the second thing is what Haroon was also talking about is that we have to, especially at the last mile in remote areas, we have to complement it with the use of, he called it foot soldiers or community itself, which is what we have done in the last seven, eight months.

There are people in the community who want to contribute and we just have to leverage that. And the third thing, as I said in the beginning, is how do we build the capacity of the teaching community at the last mile in the use of digital tools. And so, you know, kind of a hybrid model offline, online, WhatsApp has been, as I said, very useful because you can send material and TV, of course, is we have used TV in the past, TV obviously is not interactive. So therefore, as Haroon was saying, it's a one way traffic when it comes to using television. What WhatsApp allows you to have interaction, but, not necessarily live interaction, which has been good, because most of these kids were using devices of their parents on a shared basis.

So I think, you know, technology is something which is going to play a much larger role than it used to before even in remote rural areas. But we are just hoping that this crisis, you know, goes away soon and we can come back to more brick and mortar education delivery as well. At least in the medium term, in the long term, hopefully the connectivity and will also improve.

Emmerich Davies: Rumeel.

Rumeel Singh: Yeah, I think for Katha4Nepal because we've been so focused on getting the stories out through the Internet. And I think the next step for us is to see how we can get through that through the radio, the community radio, which is huge in Nepal. So, that's definitely one thing that we want to see to get a wider impact into and get access to the rural communities. And I think as Nishant was also talking about a hybrid model, this is something that we could definitely look into it as a potential for the future, where we see how we can get in like the concept of storytelling as a supplemental activity within the processes or the education processes that are intact. So, definitely something that we've been thinking about, and it's a tall task, but definitely doable and we'd be looking into definitely a hybrid model that would work to see how we can keep that interest in still engage the community as well. Because right now, all of our the content we are building right now is coming in from the community. So we've got people sharing stories through the online platform, though, so we'd have to sort of work on to see how we can get into an offline module.

Emmerich Davies: And finally, Ayaz, you have the last word of the evening. So, please take us out.

Ayaz Aziz: All right. I think when it comes to the issue of internet access, it's very difficult to solve this infrastructure problem without building infrastructure. That is basically something that of course, we need to work on it long term. But I think in the case of Bangladesh, we have a very vibrant development center, and there's a lot of different players on the ground, working on number of different issues, a lot of different organizations working. Perhaps what we should be looking is at how we can use our existing resources, and how we can partner better so that we can use the existing networks that are out there. How we can share resources, how we can leverage existing platforms, instead of having different players, try and solve infrastructure problems themselves and try to address this problem themselves.

There are, online education is never going to replace paper classroom or physical education. It's so I think even post pandemic, we'll see a blend of the two. The future of education is not going to be like it used to be before and we should start preparing ourselves for it. So, I hope that, in the short run, we do find ways of working together, and in the long run we do solve the problems that are going to be with the structure, with the access and that we can continue with the energy that we've been working with during this crisis.

Emmerich Davies: Thank you, Ayaz. Unfortunately, we're coming to the end of our time together today, and there are many more questions and we have time for. And there's a lot of excitement around the work that has been done by these four organizations and the innovations by these organizations.

So, I encourage you to check out their work separately from our time here together, and I hope that this has just been a taste of the work that is being done in the region. Please join me in thanking all our panelists Haroon, Nishant, Rumeel, Ayaz in joining us today and for their time and sharing all their work. But I also wanted to thank all our audience members for joining us from many different countries across the region in the world and many different time zones. I want to encourage all audience members to continue to check out the Mittal Institute for future events. One of the nice things about these times is that we can continue to bring people together from many different places like this and learn lessons from each other and learn lessons from South Asia and we look forward to hosting more events like this in the future. So, without further ado, please join me in thanking the panelists for their time and their insights from across the region.

Nishant Pandey: Thank you, Emmerich. Thank you, Sanjay and thank you everyone. It was a pleasure joining this panel and I learned a lot from my co-panelists, and it was a great opportunity. Thanks a lot. Take care and stay safe.

Haroon Yasin: Thanks a lot, Emmerich.

Rumee Singh: Thank you.