

REFLECTIONS ON OUR COVID RESPONSE

July 2021

Covid-19 has now been disrupting our partner education systems in India and Uganda for more than 16 months. Schools have remained closed for most or all of this period in each geography, which has had a very significant impact on our ability to reach officials, teachers and children through our work.

At STiR, our first instinct was to engage with our partner governments and identify areas where we could support with their wider response to the pandemic, while planning for the resumption of our programme. But after the first couple of months, it became clear that we needed to find new ways to engage teachers and officials and add value for governments. Our programme teams have now been delivering their Covid response activities for a full year, so we wanted to take this opportunity to share their reflections on the successes and challenges over this period.

DELHI

By Sanya Sagar, Shadab Ahmed and Tushar Pundir, Senior Managers

Over the past year, we have continued to offer our regular programme activities (except classroom observations). Our learning improvement cycles (LICs) have continued, but shifted to online delivery. Overall, we have been successful in creating channels for our stakeholders to support and share learning with each other, through peer networks and regular coaching calls. In our first LIC of the year, we helped stakeholders to think about the social and emotional wellbeing of their students and bring this to the forefront of their discussions. More recently, we've focused on using themes and strategies from our previous LICs in online teaching, which also acted as a review of our programme so far. Both LICs played a role in strengthening the use of online tools to facilitate learning for peers and students.

We're proudest of our role in supporting stakeholders to use technology efficiently and effectively. At the start of the pandemic, our team members held sessions with officials in their districts to introduce engagement tools such as Google forms, [Mentimeter](#) and [Padlet](#); features of meeting forums such as Zoom and Google Meet; and how to use online tools and phone calls to engage students. Following these sessions, we encouraged the officials to coach school leaders and teachers to build their capacity too. We believe that this has been a significant contribution in supporting teachers across Delhi to reach 75% of their students.



Our biggest challenge has been to maintain the motivation of our stakeholders. The Delhi education community has been particularly badly hit by the second wave of Covid-19, with almost every stakeholder or their family members directly affected. For this reason, we introduced sharing meetings for small groups to come together and share their feelings. Another major challenge has been equity, with a lack of access to devices from both teachers and children. Most teachers have had to be available at all hours to support their students, while trends have shown that girls have had more limited access than boys, and female teachers have lacked access compared to male teachers.

We recently conducted a feedback survey with all of our stakeholders to understand the impact of our recent LICs. Most respondents felt that the LICs had allowed them to share opinions freely, get new ideas, be recognised and learn from each other. 72% of respondents listed internet issues as their biggest challenge with remote engagement. However, more than 60% of respondents felt that technology had helped them to collaborate, give feedback and plan better, while 55% said that having to use technology motivated them to learn and explore more. With our next LIC also planned to be delivered completely virtually and a proposed shift to a blended model longer term, these findings have pushed us to think deeply about how best to structure our activities in the future.

KARNATAKA

By the Karnataka team

In Karnataka, schools have been closed for more than a year and there has been very little engagement between teachers and students in primary grades. After consulting with the government, we decided to focus our efforts on supporting our District Champions and block and cluster officials through virtual delivery of institutes and coaching meetings. Our main themes have been preparedness for virtual delivery and social and emotional wellbeing, which were selected based on a needs analysis and co-designed with senior officials in the District Institutes for Education and Training (DIETs). We've also conducted a number of open learning sessions for teachers and officials, on topics including the use of Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint, which have been very popular with our participants.



We're proud to have maintained our engagement with stakeholders despite the multiple challenges of the past year. We have regularly connected with officials to check on their wellbeing and offer support, which has been hugely beneficial in deepening our relationships with these stakeholders. In particular, we've been able to signpost many officials to courses, workshops and webinars from other providers to support their professional development.

The biggest challenges have related to technology, with poor connectivity across our districts and a lack of devices limiting participation in group activities. This has meant that our work has been restricted to officials at district, block and cluster levels, with no ability to reach out to teachers or children.

We conducted an end-of-year reflection meeting with stakeholders from all seven districts to collect feedback on our activities this year. The responses were mostly positive in all areas, with block officials reporting that they had been able to collaborate with each other, practise during our sessions, get feedback and create action plans virtually using online platforms. 100% of participants found the content relevant to their needs, and 92% were able to share ideas and collaborate with peers. They feel more comfortable using virtual platforms and leveraging these to facilitate meetings, while there have been positives in terms of scheduling and participating in sessions with greater flexibility.

“One of the most important challenges for us was to use technology to deliver training to teachers. The district team now conducts training virtually and the technical support and suggestions from STiR are very much appreciated.”

Lakshmi Devi Ma'am, Lecturer, Chikkaballapura District Institute for Education and Training

TAMIL NADU

By the Tamil Nadu team

It's been a hugely exciting year for our programme in Tamil Nadu despite very significant challenges in the state. In partnership with the government, we agreed to develop a new model of remote delivery. Each LIC contains three modules for teachers made up of videos, reading materials and reflection exercises, all shared over WhatsApp. Officials and school leaders have facilitated peer learning discussions and used tools such as Padlet and WhatsApp groups to encourage action planning and feedback. The video content has been hosted on a dedicated website, and our three LICs have covered topics including structuring the learning journey and virtual facilitation skills.

One of our biggest successes has been the expansion of our activities to seven new districts, taking us to a total of 13 in the state. This was made possible by the shift to virtual delivery, and we're very grateful for the state's support in building engagement with our new stakeholders. We've also been inspired by a group of 'Bright Spot' teachers and officials from across districts, who have shared their ideas and strategies through short videos on a public YouTube channel. In a recent survey, most teachers cited these Bright Spots as their greatest influence and inspiration.

One of the biggest challenges for our team has been the inability to travel into the field. This makes it harder to build relationships with new stakeholders, and to collect accurate data on our activities. Our stakeholders also found that virtual institutes were less effective in encouraging peer learning and conveying new content, while the absence of network meetings for teachers was identified as a significant loss.

We've collected detailed feedback from teachers and officials on their experiences over the past year. We've learned that 80% of teachers and 60% of officials would like to retain the video-based modules in our future delivery. 99% of teachers learned new best practices from the programme, and 90% of them were able to use at least one in their work. We were overwhelmed by the response from more than 10,000 teachers (more than 20%) who offered to support us to develop content next year.

UGANDA

By Akite Brenda Otika, Associate Head, Government Relations and Partnership



When schools closed in Uganda, there was a strong focus on ensuring that children had access to learning, and the Ministry was concerned that teachers were being neglected. We were therefore pleased to support by engaging teachers and officials across the education system through our Covid response activities. The most prominent activity has been the delivery of radio CPD sessions for teachers on a fortnightly basis in all districts, but this has also been supported with coaching calls for district officials and regular conference calls for headteachers to share reflections and action plans.

We're very proud of our work with the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), with whom we created training on the principles of effective radio instruction. Content developers from across the Ministry have received training which has impacted the quality of radio content for both children and teachers. At the start of the pandemic, we also reviewed and provided feedback on scripts for radio lessons for children to support with quality assurance.

The biggest challenge for STIR has been responding to the partial reopening of schools, which started in early 2021. With some teachers back in school but others remaining at home, it has been challenging to meet the needs of both groups and to schedule activities around the school day. In May, we were excited to shift to a blended approach with in-person activities becoming possible for the first time. We conducted national training institutes for senior officials and regional institutes for district officials, both with 100% attendance. This was then followed by district-based training for school leaders. However, this progress was curtailed by the announcement of another national lockdown, with 20 out of 64 school leader institutes yet to be completed. We've now returned to our programme of radio sessions and regular calls until in-person activities are able to resume.

We've also experienced a number of other challenges in the delivery of our activities. First, poor mobile network coverage has significantly affected the quality of school leader conference calls. Our team have tried to mitigate this by scheduling calls in advance so that the leaders can ensure that they are in a location with good reception. We also started to share materials and reflections using WhatsApp for those unable to join the calls. The other major challenge has been the limited opportunity for stakeholders to follow up on their action plans, but we have emphasised the need for effective planning for lessons and many teachers have been able to improve their practices.

Although there continues to be significant uncertainty about the rest of the year, we're excited by our progress towards sustainability. We will be supporting the NCDC in implementing the new lower secondary school curriculum across the whole country, and we're also in discussion about including our materials in the national CPD curriculum. We look forward to sharing further updates on these projects soon.

OUR KEY LEARNING

Based on our learning globally, we're now taking forward the following recommendations:

- Our relationships with governments are critical to ensure that we can meaningfully co-design and contextualise our approach, particularly since our Covid response differs from place to place.
- Because of the structures and relationships we have in place, we have been able to support governments to respond to the crisis by being flexible and adaptive in our design and delivery.
- The middle tier (districts) have really engaged over the past year and continued to see themselves as role-models for teachers, giving us confidence that we will be able to build back quickly.
- Wherever possible, we intend to resume in-person meetings and institutes, particularly at teacher level, to ensure the maximum opportunity for practice and feedback.
- Clear technology adaption plans are critical to ensure that our stakeholders are fully equipped to use technology effectively.
- We will continue to use digital resources (especially short videos) to demonstrate model examples, even when we can resume in-person activities.
- There is a need for a long-term planning exercise with governments to identify what we want to achieve together, and how we will show impact across all levels of the system given Covid restrictions.
- There is also more that STiR can do to prepare ourselves for future shocks and changes, and we are developing scenario plans for sudden shutdowns.