

The National Coalition on the Education Emergency

- Building macro-resilience in response to the pandemic

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Abstract

The pandemic has caused the near collapse of the already weak Indian public education system. Prolonged school closures along with caste, gender, and economic marginalisation are forcing children to endure malnutrition, physical and mental health challenges, child labour, and early marriages, in addition to learning deprivation. The system's response has not reached the grassroots. NGOs across the country provide services at the ground level, but national-level coordination is insufficient. This paper studies the National Coalition on the Education Emergency (NCEE), established by individuals and groups from across India, as a case of building macro-resilience, emphasising principles of equity, universal access, humane education, decentralised decision-making, and public investment. Through a critical examination of the work done by the NCEE on curating curricular resources (OERs), conducting and compiling research studies, developing policy tracking tools, networking with partners and collaborators, creating larger awareness, social mobilisation, advocacy and interacting with governments to inform their programs and policies, the paper will discuss challenges in the Indian education system and the attempts to address them within a federal state structure. It looks at why an integrated nationwide response to the crisis is necessary.

Keywords: education emergency, pandemic, national collaboration, equity and inclusion, building resilience

Background and Rationale

The continued highly stringent and centralised response of the establishment to the pandemic, meant mass migration, no income support, insufficient food and nutrition, limited or no access to healthcare and eventually limited or no access to vaccines. Many NGOs and volunteer groups including those working in the field of education, had to prioritise these issues and spend time, effort and resources on trying to cater to some of the basic needs of people and ensure their survival. The health issues, poor nutrition and income loss in families had a deep and catastrophic impact on children since these constitute their immediate environment. A few months into the relief work, many experts and organisations working with the public school system started to estimate the impact of challenges induced by the pandemic on education. In response, individuals, NGOs and community-based groups began innovating and adopting different approaches to mitigate the crisis. However, consolidated efforts were limited and even organisations that already had a pan-India presence struggled to effectively bring together the strategies being adopted in different states across the country.

As early as May 2020, less than two months into the nationwide lockdown in India, the Right to Education Forum¹ submitted an appeal by civil society to the Indian Prime Minister to ensure that the rights of children are protected during the COVID-19 pandemic. This covered rights to survival, protection, education and development. It stated that without adequate educational support, children would fall prey to child labour, trafficking, child marriage and large-scale drop-out from school (RTEF, 2020). The signatories urged for solutions to be designed taking into account the existing differential access to technology across caste, income levels, gender and communities so that it does not further exacerbate the prevailing inequalities in learning opportunities. Yet, these concerns were not a part of the dominant public discourse and the extent of damage was far more than anyone could have foreseen. Marginalised groups that are over-represented in vulnerable jobs, reported experiencing food shortages and severe cash crunch during the pandemic-induced lockdown period (Ghatak et al., 2020). As a consequence of this economic distress, socio-economically weak families resorted to child labour and child marriages as coping mechanisms to increase family income or reduce expenditure. The Delhi Commission of Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) reported in April 2021 that in just one year there has been an increase of nearly 490 per cent in the number of children rescued from child labour as against the previous three years (The New Indian Express, 2021). The National Crime Records Bureau reported that child marriages had risen across the country from 523 in 2019 to 785 in 2020 during the pandemic (NCRB, 2020). The actual numbers would be much higher.

Against this background, the idea of a 'National Coalition' to work on the 'Education Emergency' emerged through a consultation with individuals working in education, from different states, organised with the objective

¹ a national level advocacy network working for the universalization of education

of building consensus on the immediate actions needed, outlining guiding principles, and creating a broad functioning structure. From the discussions, the decision was taken to respond to the emergency on the pedagogical as well as socio-political fronts with a strong research base supporting both. The outcome was the formation of the NCEE with three working groups - (i) education support to communities (ii) social mobilisation and (iii) research.

With the aim to initiate a concerted nation-wide approach and 'resume and renew education for 26 crore children' in primary and secondary school, the NCEE is working towards building macro-resilience in response to the education emergency arising from the pandemic. Macro-resilience here refers to building resilience at an institutional, systemic level that is not limited to a particular group, organisation, geography or problem area, but looks at a nation-wide response to problems in the education system, especially those arising from the pandemic. It means connecting with governments and organisations across the country, becoming aware of risks and challenges, and working together to deal with problems that affect us individually and collectively. 'Learning from the pandemic has shown that where there has been a degree of collaboration, responses have been strongest and the impacts of the pandemic have been minimized' (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021).

Key Research Questions

1. What challenges to education arose during the pandemic across the country?
2. How might these challenges be understood in the context of educational exclusion and the hampered holistic development of children?
3. What were the strategies employed by the NCEE to address the challenges and how did these impact the building of macro-resilience?

Research Design

This paper employs an intrinsic case study methodology which is used to 'analyse and interpret the uniqueness of real individuals and situations' and 'to present and represent reality – to give a sense of 'being there'.' (Cohen, et al., 2010) The design consists of studying innovative models adopted by organisations, using theory to interpret impact, collecting data through observations and interactions, and reviewing documents. This includes sources such as books, newspapers, journals, reports, and other written material. Some of the data is based on findings of research studies carried out under the auspices of the NCEE. The paper will review the challenges that the Indian education system has been burdened with due to the pandemic, apply theoretical models to understand the impact that these have had on children, and attempt to present a critical and reflective perspective on the work of the coalition in the wider socio-political context of the pandemic.

Discussion and Analysis

This paper uses two theoretical models to interpret and get a deeper understanding of this impact. The first model helps to understand the forms of educational exclusion that different groups of children have been subjected to by comparing and contrasting the child's life in the absence of the pandemic with the present scenario, and the second model presents the impact of the pandemic on factors that influence a child's development.

Zones of Exclusion

The Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) has a model of 'zones of exclusion' from education (Lewin, 2007a), which can serve as a useful tool to analyse how different groups of children experienced educational exclusion as a result of the issues brought about by the pandemic.

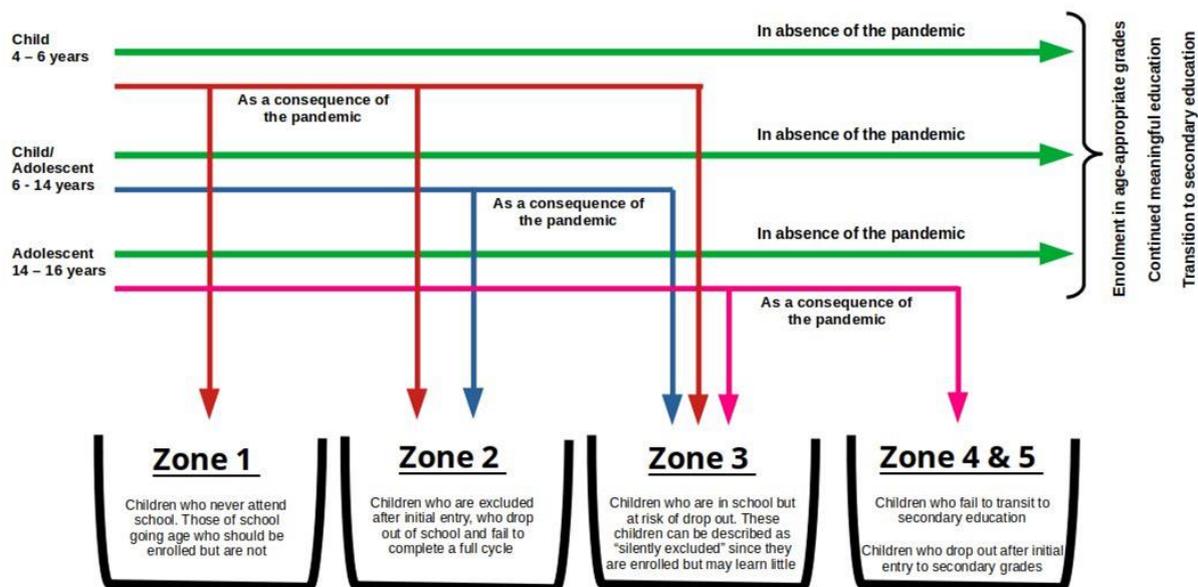


Figure 1: Authors' adaptation of CREATE's model of zones of exclusion from education

In most states in India, pre-schools and lower primary grades were shut for close to two years since March 2020 and only began opening up towards the end of 2021. In this period, thousands of children in the age group of 4 – 6, who would have otherwise been enrolled in schools, fell into Zone 1.

The large number of children in the age group of 12 – 16 who succumbed to child marriages and child labour fell into Zone 4 with the likelihood of permanent exclusion being very high and their chances of continuing education being seriously threatened. A child protection officer in Maharashtra, India reported that while the situation was already bad before the pandemic and he would encounter many cases involving 16 and 17 year olds, he now sees brides as young as 12 years old. (NPR,2020)

For children who have had limited to no learning opportunities over the past two years, comprehending what is being taught is a challenge. Studies show that in addition to not having progressed in their learning, students have also forgotten what they had learnt in the past and lost abilities they had previously acquired (Azim Premji Foundation, 2021). The gap between grade-level teaching and the learning levels of the children could lead to disinterest in learning and disengagement among students. Therefore, even children who have managed to continue their education are at risk of dropping out, especially those from marginalised and disadvantaged groups. These students have fallen into Zone 3.

Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) 'ecological systems theory' is widely used in research on human development. It is a framework that emphasises social interactions within a particular context and environment at a particular time as being central to child development. It defines the developing child as being at the centre of four complex environmental layers or systems. The child is affected by each one, right from the immediate context of family to the broader cultural aspects.

Figure 2 shows what this model might have looked like for a child from a socio-economically vulnerable family in India before the pandemic hit in 2020. Now, if we were to apply this development theory to any child of school going age in India during the pandemic, we would see that each of the four systems would look vastly different from what it may have been pre-pandemic. Figure 3 is a representation of the possible ecological systems for such a child including the components that were severely affected by the pandemic and may have contributed to the devastating impact on the social and emotional development of the child.

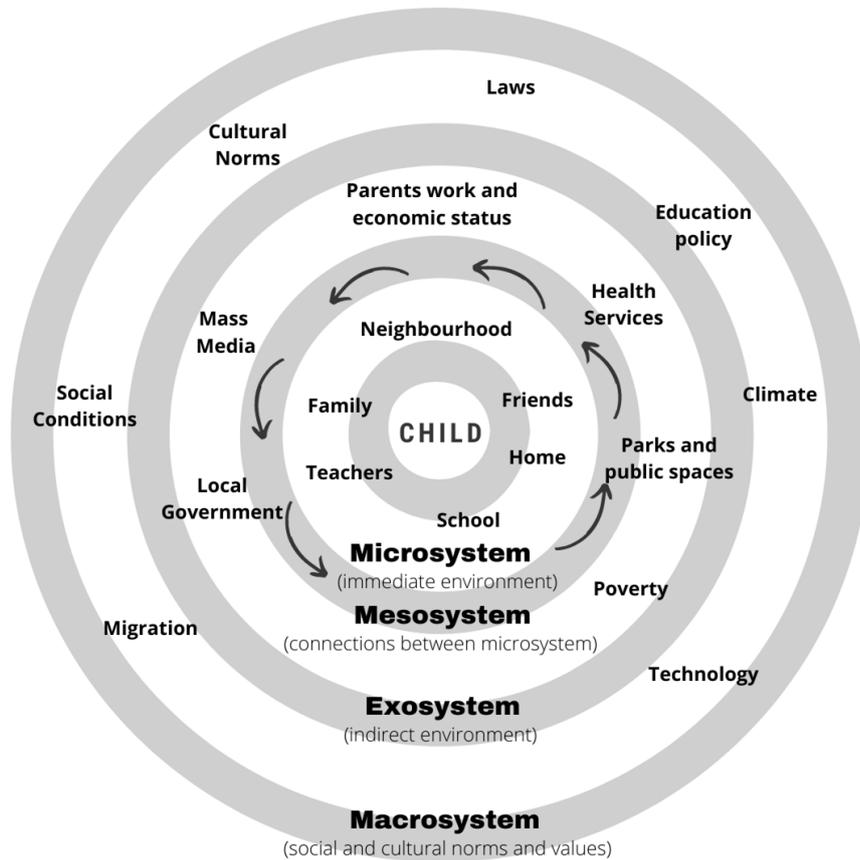


Figure 2: Author's adaptation - Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model for child pre-pandemic

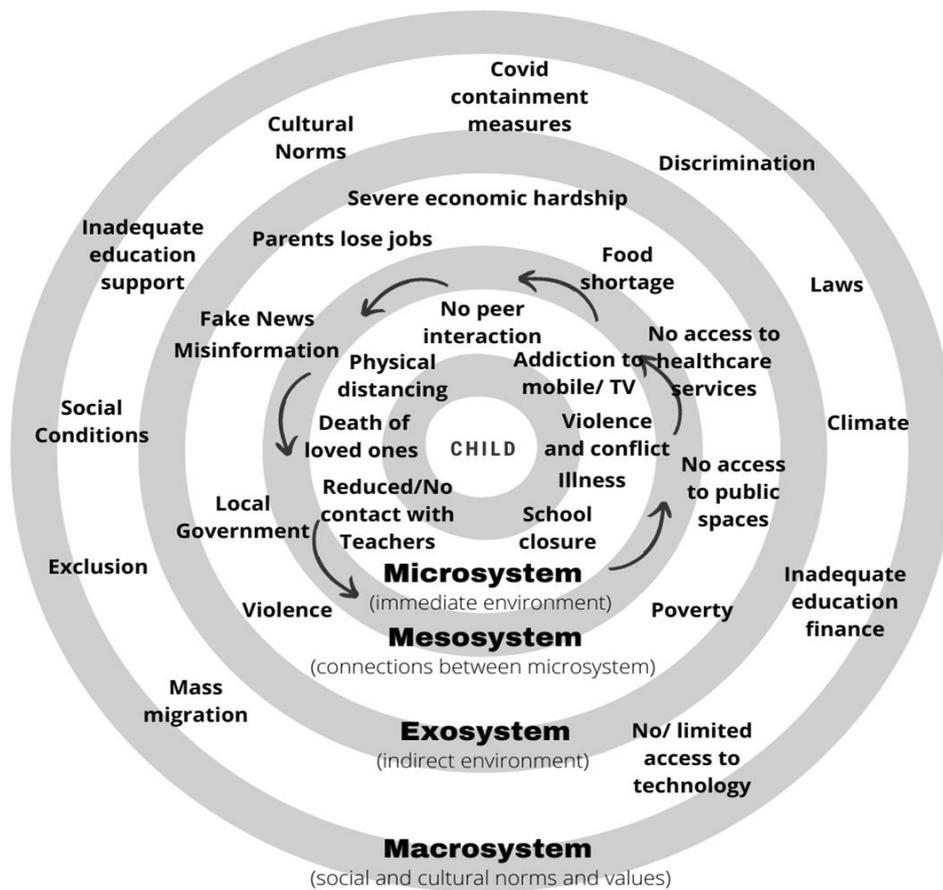


Figure 3: Author's adaptation - Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model for child during pandemic

When looked at from the lens of these two models, it is clear that the challenges brought about by the pandemic proved disastrous for children already at the margins. It increased their vulnerability when it came to educational exclusion and hampered holistic development.

The members of the NCEE's working group on research began by compiling data to create a compendium of research studies conducted across India and selected international studies between early 2020 and mid 2021. As of September 2020, an estimated 1 billion children globally were at risk of falling behind due to school closures aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2020). In early 2021, research studies and media articles began to acknowledge and report the 'education crisis' that had gripped the world. Most countries started following policies aligned with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advisory that 'schools should be the last settings to close because of COVID-19 and the first to reopen when they can do so safely' (CDC, 2021).

Meanwhile, in India continuous school closures were enforced across states. This is in contrast to many countries that prioritised keeping schools open vis-a-vis malls, shops and gyms (BCG, 2022). India's continued centralised decision making meant schools across the country were shut, even if there were periods where some districts had less than 25 COVID-19 cases daily. As of November 2021, India was among the top two countries in terms of total duration of school closures (full and partial) at 82 weeks (UNESCO, 2021). While schools were closed, some efforts were made by the school system to adopt technologies in the form of TV, radio and online teaching-learning. However, the reach of these mechanisms has not been universal and the question of whether these resources were actually adding any value remained. A study conducted in 2020 found that only 4% of students in rural areas and less than 20% in urban areas had access to essential digital infrastructure. (Reddy et al., 2020). The 2020 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) survey found that only 36 percent of all enrolled children received learning materials or activities from their teachers.

The Ministry of Education announced some policy measures such as e-Vidya, an initiative that included an OER portal, TV channels for streaming of classes, and use of community radio for learning. They also conducted online training programs for teachers like the 'National Initiative for School Heads and Teachers Holistic Advancement', and released guidelines for digital education. The difficulty with these initiatives was that they were removed from the day-to-day realities of the teachers and students and could not be practically realised on the ground. In a survey conducted by members of the NCEE to understand the learning experiences of students during the pandemic, learners expressed that TV programs were hardly beneficial. In the words of students, "they don't give time to write, the screen changes very fast so we can't make notes", "when teacher is in front of us we can ask questions directly but with TV we cannot get doubts cleared."

For a brief period after the first wave of COVID-19, and in the aftermath of the second wave, some states took steps to reopen schools while others delayed it further. The NCEE's 'Open Schools Now' campaign focussed on urging governments to pay heed to the needs of young children along with ensuring safety and provision of meals. In a system where the 'mid-day meal' scheme is the lifeline of millions of children, school closures have led to poor health and malnutrition. OXFAM India (2020) reported that 35% children in India were not receiving meals despite government orders. The NCEE in collaboration with groups working on the Right to Food advocated for eggs to be included as part of the mid-day meal program to reduce malnutrition and promote childrens' health. De-centralised decision making by state governments on school closures based on varying infection rates was also advocated for.

To track policy measures on school opening across states and by level of education, the Policy Tracker: School Opening Status was developed by NCEE. A common pattern emerged in the responses by different state governments: opening of higher secondary and high schools was prioritised, for conducting exams, while primary schools remained wholly or partially closed until the end of October 2021. This is aligned with the infamous mindset of the Indian education system to focus on class X and XII 'board' examinations. According to (Sharma, 2021), "the examination system in this country has always been an exclusionary and discriminatory mode of assessment. And during the pandemic it became cruel, more than ever before." NCEE at this point advocated for summative, high-stakes assessments to be de-emphasised given the gaps in educational opportunities and variation in learning, and focus to be laid on students' academic, social and emotional learning progress.

Prolonged school closures have washed over decades of progress in education in India. Children have not only lost out on basic literacy and numeracy but have also had significant loss of social and emotional learning. NCEE's first survey of high school teachers in a sample of schools in the state of Karnataka, including metropolitan Bangalore, showed that only 15 percent of Grade 8 teachers, 20 percent of Grade 9 teachers and about 25 percent of Grade 10 teachers felt that their students were at grade level in language and mathematics. These findings highlighted the urgency to address the large gap between students' learning levels and the curriculum. Teachers expressed the need to be given proper guidance, support, a certain level of autonomy and time to cope with the challenges arising from re-opening schools after more than 1.5 years.

The NCEE found through several consultations that different approaches were being evolved organically by teachers and organisations to support children's continued learning. Based on the premise that the ideas and insights from these interventions could inform the development of a model(s) for education support which can aid practices on the ground, the working group on education support began documenting the innovation models in a structured manner. One such model was the 'Vataara Shaale' initiative or "village school" by a teacher network organisation in Karnataka where students gathered in an open space in a village, and teachers from the community conducted classes to ensure continuity in education. As reported by an NCEE member who is part of the teacher network organisation, the initiative saw an enhanced relation building among teachers and students as the teachers' energies could be focused more on helping children learn rather than being beaten down by syllabus or administrative pressures. Learnings from such experiences reaffirmed the importance of agency and adequate support for teachers. To support teachers and school administrators in coping with the resuming of teaching-learning practices after the very abnormal disruption that the system had faced, an Open Educational Resource (OER) repository containing additional resources and tools sourced from the multiple "alternative" interventions was conceived. The resources were not intended to be prescriptive but rather to equip teachers and educators with a flexible repertoire of approaches that could enable them to respond to children's needs at different levels.

The NCEE also conducted rapid surveys of households in the states of Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu to study parents' experiences and perceptions, after the opening of schools. The study found 'that poor parents are desperate about the education future of their children and fully conscious of the devastating toll that prolonged school closure has taken on the learning, socio-emotional development and behaviour of their children' (NCEE, 2022). The report was titled 'Cries of Anguish' because of the individual testimonies of parents that were included, apart from the quantitative data. Parents highlighted the changed behaviour, lack of focus and attention and the addiction to mobile phones amongst their children.

In these circumstances, it seemed imperative that certain protocols and principles be defined taking into account the repercussions of all the issues brought about by the pandemic. In this regard, based on the experiences and inputs of the coalition members and expertise of professionals in the field of education, a detailed set of guidelines for officials and stakeholders in the education system was formulated and released in the publication 'A Future At Stake' (NCEE, 2021). The document, centred on principles of equity, empathy, socio-emotional development, meaningful communication and sustained commitment, lays out a framework for the educational recovery effort. Efforts to push governments to adopt these guidelines resulted in a contextualised and condensed version being issued to schools, teachers and officials by the Department of State Education Research and Training (DSERT) in the state of Karnataka. Meetings were held and appeals were sent to governments in order to bring attention to the catastrophic consequences of school closures for children, on the academic, emotional, nutritional, social and economic fronts. The NCEE released a research brief in September 2021. This 3-pager with the call to 'End Education Exclusion' was then used to mobilise individuals and communities and engage with governments to push for policy level changes for schools. Although this helped to raise awareness, the NCEE was not able to replicate many policy level changes such as the issuance of the Karnataka guidelines in other states.

Although the above efforts on the pedagogical front were met with some success, it was far more challenging to make a similar headway on the socio-political side. Several attempts were made by the NCEE's working group on social mobilisation to work with unions and associations such as those of migrant labourers, hawkers and street vendors who were most affected by the lockdowns. However, partnerships could not be established to carry forward work on education related issues as the groups themselves are stretched for time and necessary resources. The NCEE organised street protests, issued statements to build awareness and submitted several petitions and open letters to members of the parliament and Chief Ministers of states demanding action. These demands gained traction and were reported in several national and local media outlets. Bearing in mind the linguistic diversity of the country, many of these letters, petitions and press releases were translated into multiple languages including Hindi, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Malayalam and Bengali. The NCEE was not able to reach all states due to lack of networks and sufficient resources, and therefore these translation activities could not be expanded to cover more states and languages.

Lack of adequate funding in the education sector in India has been a serious concern for decades. The NCEE recognised that the need of the hour is not only increased public spending on education but also appropriate allocations for addressing the issues of resuming learning, reorganising the curriculum, combating malnutrition, and supporting the socio-emotional development of children. The 'Policy Tracker : State Education Finance' launched by NCEE consists of three maps that provide information on education budgets and education financing by state Ministries of Education for the years 2020-21 and 2021-22. These maps were developed based on data collected by PRS Legislative Research. The tracker reports that in 2020-21, most states allocated less than 4 percent of their income to education and drastically reduced their education budget allocations vis-à-vis their original budget estimates. In 2021-22, a majority of states decreased or kept constant their education budget allocations compared to 2020-21. Experts and members of NCEE highlighted the dire need for heavy investments from central and state governments in education and opined that this issue needed serious attention in order to

deal with the education emergency.

Although the NCEE has been able to achieve many of its goals, its work has met with enormous challenges and limitations. The work of the coalition needs to be looked at in the context of the current political scenario in India, where receptiveness to civil society participation in policy-making is low. This has meant much more time, effort, engagement on the ground, and continuous advocacy in order to see small changes. One of the most important gains has been that the term 'education emergency' has entered the public lexicon and has been used in mass media to highlight issues concerning learning and development of children in the country. One of the biggest shortcomings has been the struggle to build a nation-wide network as was initially envisioned for the coalition to work on mitigating the crisis in education. The NCEE itself has limited funding and works purely on the voluntary contributions of concerned individuals and organisations striving to affect change.

Conclusion

Renewing education and enhancing system resilience, especially for the most marginalised, involves supporting learners and teachers, capacity-building, investment in physical and academic infrastructure, reforming curriculum, and developing alternative learning solutions. In this pursuit of building resilience, the NCEE has been focussed on equity, universal access and humane education. The nationwide approach, collaboration, and consolidation of efforts have helped realise some of these intentions but there is much that remains to be done. It is too early to assess the larger impact and implications of the work done by the NCEE. The challenges are ongoing and would require responses on both the pedagogical and socio-political fronts for years to come. As long as the crisis continues to persist, it appears that the coalition will too.

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