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Breaking the child labour cycle through education: issues and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children of in-country seasonal migrant workers in the brick kilns of Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This viewpoint offers a commentary on the status of Nepalese children of migrant workers in the brick kilns of the construction industry and the potential impacts of COVID-19 on their lives. The paper identifies a temporal cycle of movement in the life of a child from a migrant working family with the variances that need to be taken into consideration by stakeholders to tackle child labour, and to reduce risks to children of migrant workers posed by the current pandemic. It draws on the education and emergencies literature to examine 'lessons learned' and considers key questions to ask in the time of COVID-19, especially in the education sector, to mitigate further entrenchment of exclusion of this group of children in Nepal.

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Introduction

The status of Nepalese children of families who seasonally migrate in-country for employment in brick kilns is precarious. Despite child labour being illegal in Nepal, children are conspicuously involved in paid and unpaid work in this hazardous occupation, and face specific barriers to engagement in education (Ministry of Education 2015). The devastating earthquakes of 2015 increased the demand for bricks and the ensuing boom in the construction industry continues to attract families to migrate for work to the peripheries of cities and semi-urban centres. Primarily from low income households, families travel from mountain and hilly regions to work in seasonal brick kilns that spring up on the plains and Kathmandu Valley that operate from the end of the harvest in October until the July monsoons (Daly et al. 2020a). A recent report estimated that 28,000 children are now working in hazardous conditions in the brick kilns of Nepal; of these 20% are children under the age of 16, and up to 6000 children work for more than 15 h a day, for 7 days a week (Terre des Hommes 2019).

Many challenges persist for children of in-country seasonal migrant workers in Nepal, which will undoubtedly be exacerbated by the current COVID-19 global pandemic. The loss of income due to closure of brick kilns, disrupted access to education and development projects, and risk of contracting COVID-19 will have immediate and long term impacts on families' livelihoods and increased vulnerabilities in children's lives (Armitage and Nellums 2020; International Organisation on Migration 2020a, 2020b; International Labour Organisation/UNICEF 2020).

This viewpoint contributes to an emerging commentary on COVID-19, child labour and migration, and to the research field on the role of education in emergencies.

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Parental migration for employment in brick kilns

Families that migrate within Nepal to work in brick kilns do so for economic reasons as they predominantly originate from poorer communities and are lower skilled. Due to poverty and low parental engagement with the education system, children of migrant workers are more likely to enter into brick kiln labour, with little opportunity or expectation to attend school (Sharma and Dangal 2019). Child migration with families and their risk to engagement in child work as paid or unpaid labour is a long-established economic necessity. In many low-income countries, governments and international and national non-governmental organisations (I/NGOs) use educational interventions to support the wellbeing of children in migrant families and, in particular, to challenge the worst forms of child labour (Larmar et al. 2017; Brown 2012). In Nepal, differences in attitudes towards education lie the socio-economic status of families as well as embedded culture, traditional and familial dynamics while political and societal views influence educational policy and practice (Acharya and Yoshino 2010).

From a review of the literature (Daly et al. 2020a, 2020b) we have identified a temporal cycle of movement in the lives of many children from migrant working families who seasonally migrate for work in the brick kilns of Nepal (see Figure 1). While movement is not a continuous cycle, from the point of parental decision to migrate for work children's lives change along a pattern of experience that includes being left behind/migrate, to enter brick kiln work/work in the household and ultimately for many children dissociation with education (Daly et al. 2020a, 2020b; Sharma and Dangal 2019).

Undoubtedly there are variances between different children, ages of children, families and societies. In addition, the extent of children's inclusion in decision making in migration is not well understood nor their perspectives well represented in research (Alipio et al. 2015; Dobson 2009). However, numbers 1–5 in Figure 1, discussed below, represent a few of the variances of experiences of education, as well as noting exceptions for some children, that need to be taken into consideration by researchers, decision makers and organisations when tackling the cycle of child labour due to parental migration to brick kilns.

1. Children migrate with their family

In Nepal, poor and low-skilled families are inclined to travel within the country, often seasonally, and to travel as a whole family to the destination of the workplace. The poorest families may be less concerned for their children to enter into education in the new settlement area of the brick kilns as

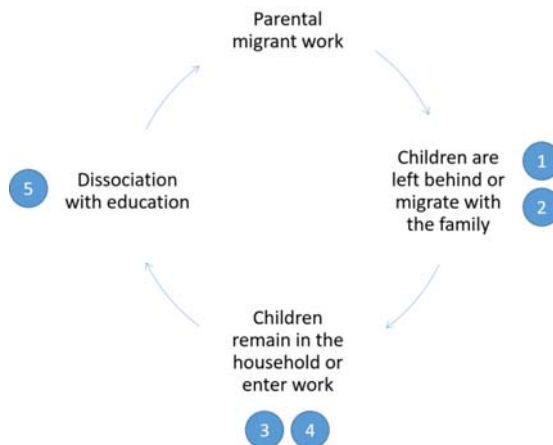


Figure 1. The cycle of child labour in seasonal migration to brick kilns in Nepal.

they have need for them to contribute to the household by looking after younger children or household work (Sharma and Dangal 2019). There are exceptions in that if children move to large urban centres such as Kathmandu where future alternative work prospects are higher for children, child labourers are encouraged to attend school or other informal educational programmes (Terre des Hommes 2019; Save the Children 2016).

2. Left-behind children and remittances

Some migrating parents chose to leave their children with wider kinship groups in villages (Acharya and Yoshino 2010). The role of these 'left-behind' children, regardless of age, is to fill the domestic void left by their parents. This tends to be the case for young girls, disabled children, children from poorer families, and those that reside in remote parts of Nepal. Parents who have left their children to find work may have increased incomes, and send money home for their children's education. Migrant workers' remittances and resulting increase in spending on children's health and education, are shown to reduce the likelihood of child labour (Sharma and Dangal 2019). However, children of parents that do not have surplus income to send as remittances, also tend to take up seasonal migration employment as they grow up, setting up intergenerational patterns of migration for low skilled work. This is shown through the young age of and low levels of education obtained by current workers in brick kilns (Adhikari and Deshingkar 2015).

3. Children enter brick kiln work

Children that migrate with their family to brick kilns are more prone to enter into child labour, due to their household's financial situation (Sharma and Dangal 2019). A cycle of deprivation is reinforced by an absence of education (Brown, 212). Child labour entraps children into a cycle of poverty through diminishing rights and time for education, physical and mental health impacts of long hours of work, and limited access to educational provision. The nature and intensity of the work carried out by child labourers impacts on the child's health, access to and benefit from education (International Labour Office and Understanding Children's Work 2010). Successful interventions improve access to education by placing facilities closer to the work place, workers' accommodation, or creating 'mobile' schools (Larmar et al. 2017). The INGO, Terre des Hommes has worked with owners of brick kilns in Nepal on a 'Code of Conduct' to stop children under-16 working, and all children including those older than 16, to have greater access to education (Terre des Hommes 2019). Through encouraging demand for and acceptability of education among the community, along with easier access, these types of interventions encourages parents through social pressure and also forces employers to support the education of children.

4. Children remain in the household

Children who migrate with families or who are left-behind engage with household work to support their family. This includes childcare of younger children, growing food, cooking and cleaning while parents are at work. Across the country 30.2% of children aged 0–59 months are left in the care of another child younger than 10 years old (UNICEF 2016). Children also support their parents' work in the brick kilns, informally and without pay, by gathering bricks for counting or transporting bricks to trucks. As parents are paid per brick produced, this informal child labour means brick quota targets are met and household income secured (Sharma and Dangal 2019). Disabled children are more likely to work in the household and miss out on education. The long hours of children's household responsibilities impact on their regular engagement with school (Terre des Hommes 2019; Save the Children 2016).

5. Dissociation with education

The age in which children either migrate with their families for work or are left-behind by their families, impacts on children's dissociation with education. Among seasonal migrant workers in brick kilns, parental attitudes towards education is based on need, with basic literacy and numeracy skills deemed sufficient. In addition, children's desire for education changes as they mature and get drawn into work in the brick kilns (Sharma and Dangal 2019). Distinctions should be made between out of school child labourers to include 'non-school entrants (i.e. children never entering school), late entrants (i.e. children not yet enrolled but who eventually will be) and those who are early school leavers'. Children who attend school intermittently, repeat years or are older when they start school are less likely to finish their basic education (International Labour Office and Understanding Children's Work 2010, 42).

Impacts of COVID-19 on children of migrant workers

Emerging briefings on the specific impact of COVID-19 on children of migrant workers note the impacts of the shutdown of schools, pressures on development projects to meet the needs of children, and that children are at an increased risk of child labour (Armitage and Nellums 2020; Terre des Hommes 2020; International Labour Organisation/UNICEF 2020).

Rapid reviews concerned with migration in the South Asia region present an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on international migrant workers highlighting implications for those from low-income countries (International Organisation on Migration 2020a). The reduction of international remittances and status of Nepalese workers returning from high-income countries has been discussed in the Nepalese press (Regmi 2020). Loss of income due to lockdown and travel restrictions will also be keenly felt by low-income, in-country seasonal migrant workers as they are less likely to have savings and more likely to have employment related debts (Sharma and Dangal 2019; Migration Health South Asia Network 2020). Seasonal migrant workers in Nepal are often lower-skilled and many are landless relying on rented parcels of land to grow food. They lack access to social protection and health and welfare safety nets, and have limited social capital to support families. Financial implications of COVID-19 increase the risk of household poverty and exposure to exploitation (International Organisation on Migration 2020a, 2020b). In turn, extreme household poverty increases the risk of child trafficking and child labour, with further exploitation for those children working in hazardous conditions including increased vulnerabilities to COVID-19 (International Labour Organisation/UNICEF 2020; World Bank 2020).

In common with many countries experiencing the pandemic, the Ministry of Education in Nepal have implemented a number of strategies for continuing education. These include: online learning portals, local planning at Education Cluster municipality level, printed learning activity booklets, radio, television and internet materials. Socially distanced teacher training supports teachers in new ways of remote teaching. Guidelines identify five groupings of students in relation to access-in-remote provision including: students with no online access, students with radio access, students with TV access, students with computers but no internet access, and students with computers and internet access (Gautam 2020). Significant challenges remain for the poorest children, disabled children, children of migrants and those less likely to be engaged with education before the pandemic (Gautam 2020; Ministry of Education, United Nations Children's Fund and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2016).

Education in emergencies? Lessons learnt from post-earthquake Nepal that can be applied to COVID-19 responses

There is much to learn from research on education and emergencies including from the immediate and reconstruction responses post-2015 earthquakes in Nepal, that can be applied to the current

situation following COVID-19. UNICEF advocates integration of planning for education in programmes in areas of instability as preparedness rather than reaction and schools as safe spaces for children (UNICEF 2020). The complexities of rights to education, politics and politicisation of education and entrenched socio-economic and cultural inequalities are backdrops to education in emergencies (Pherali 2019). Women and girls, and those with disabilities are at risk of increased sexual violence during emergencies and the specific situation of migrant women needs to be taken into account (Standing, Parker, and Bista 2016; Bista et al. 2018). Alongside ensuring safe access to education during emergencies it is also important to consider the role of the teacher in developing opportunities for learning and in providing a constant or new sense of belonging for migrant children (UNICEF 2020; Pherali, Moghli, and Chase 2020).

Inequalities in education are intensified by emergencies. The global challenge of COVID-19 impacts on the poorest groups in society, who have limited access to digital technologies, lack social protection and who endure socio-economic pressures that exacerbate education, health, and well-being inequalities for families and children. Children of migrant workers and especially those engaged in the brick kilns of the construction industry in Nepal require specific attention in order to mitigate entrenchment of existing inequalities. Current rapid reviews on the impact of COVID-19 on migrating families offer little education focused recommendations beyond 'maintaining children's access to education and health services' (International Organisation on Migration, 12th May, 2020, p.4). However, the reality of migrant children's lives is that their access to education and health services is neither equal, guaranteed nor stable.

The joint report by the International Labour Organisation and UNICEF (2020) on child labour stresses the need for urgent and combined action to tackle the impacts of COVID-19 on children who work and those at risk of exploitation. It is clear that children of seasonal migrant workers employed in the hazardous brick kiln industry of Nepal, or have significant roles in household economies, are also a neglected group in this exacerbating context of COVID-19 (Terre des Hommes 2020).

Conclusion

Based on these findings, and drawing on [Figure 1](#) of the cycle of movement in children's lives due to parental migration, we encourage policy makers, stakeholders and practitioners to consider the role of education in responses to COVID-19. We suggest that alongside identifying the current status of migrating adults, the following conditions in children's lives and engagement with education should be understood and inform action. Firstly, children's situation with regard to whether they have travelled with family members or are 'left-behind' should be considered, and in each circumstance identify what education, health and welfare supports are present (stages 1 and 2 of [Figure 1](#)). Following this, the age-specific risks for children remaining in the household for domestic purposes, or being drawn into external employment, as well as the level of education and access to school children have, should be established (stages 3 and 4). Finally, it should be ascertained if and when children have disassociated from education altogether (stage 5), and what exploitative child labour and or child trafficking risks require mitigation and child safeguarding action. These three core responses are demonstrated in [Figure 2](#).

As suggested in [Figure 2](#), key questions to ask about the status of left behind and working children in migrant families would provide an informed education response.

In addition, we also offer the following recommendations for consideration. A rapid review in Nepal is needed on the impacts of the COVID-19 lockdown and increased vulnerabilities to poverty, educational exclusion, poor health and increased risk of contracting COVID-19 of children of in-country seasonal migrant workers of brick kilns. Furthermore, coordinated action planning at municipality level is needed to lessen the impact of a potential backwards trend on prior progress in reducing child labour in Nepal. Government and I/NGOs have considerable post-earthquake experiences of multi-agency responses to act in a coordinated way to increase the social protection

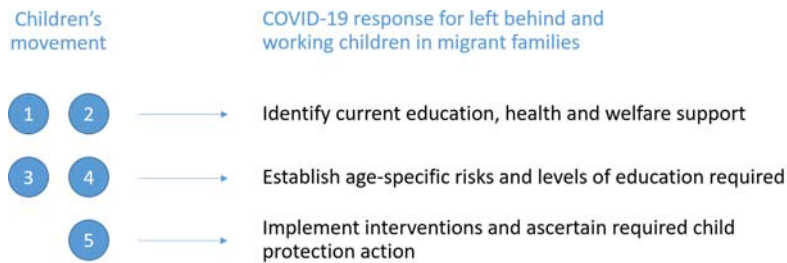


Figure 2. COVID-19 response for left behind and working children in migrant families.

and welfare of this group of children during this time of considerable risk (Gautam 2020; Standing, Parker, and Bista 2016).

Children's voices are often excluded from research and notwithstanding the challenges to speak with children living at brick kilns, efforts should be made to make views of children and their families known (Sharma and Dangal 2019; Alipio et al. 2015; Dobson 2009). Safe, Covid-secure, mechanisms to expand interdisciplinary empirical research specifically with children of seasonal in-country migrant workers in brick kilns should inform action. Understanding children's views on seasonal migration, their experiences of education, their own contributions to household economic stability, access to welfare and exposure to risks are important in developing multi-agency approaches where education is seen as part of the solution, rather than a separate entity.

In summary, in considering the implications of children's movement when parents migrate for work, ensuring access to education for children in vulnerable situations (Sustainable Development Goal 4.5) remains key, we believe, to protecting the lives and promoting positive development of children of migrant workers in brick kilns in Nepal during these unprecedented times.

Disclosure statement

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