Equity in Education:
Inclusive Education for Marginalized Children in Nepal

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Acronyms

CAS	Continuous Assessment System
CDC	Curriculum Development Center
CEHRD	Centre for Education and Human Resource Development
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of the Person with Disability
DEO	District Education Office
EFA	Education for All
EMIS	Educational Management Information System
ERO	Education Review Office
GoN	Government of Nepal
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
IFAD	International Fund for Agriculture Development
ILO	International Labor Organization
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
NASA	National Assessment of Student Achievement
NDHS	Nepal Demographic and Health Survey
NLSS	Nepal Living Standard Survey
NPC	National Planning Commission
REACH MDTF	Result in Education for All Children Multi Donor Trust Fund
ROSA	Regional Office for South Asia
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIP	School Improvement Plan
SSDP	School Sector Development Plan
SSRP	School Sector Reform Plan
SWAp	Sector-wide Approach
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VCDF	Vulnerable Community Development Framework
WB	World Bank

Executive Summary

Recognizing that education is the foundation of all other development, the government of Nepal has implemented multiple reform initiatives within the school education system. Several educational interventions have taken place after restoring democracy in 1990, with the latest being the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), which began in mid-2016 for a duration of seven years. The World Bank is also collaborating with the government of Nepal in the education sector through grants, loans, and technical assistance. Despite these significant efforts by the government of Nepal and its development partners, a substantial number of marginalized children—such as Dalit children, girls, children with disabilities, highly marginalized indigenous children, HIV-infected children, working children, street children, and conflict-affected children—are still out of school and face a high risk of dropping out. The quality of education at the school level is also questionable, and marginalized children are not accessing or participating in the learning process as hoped. This study aims to demonstrate the impact of the SSDP on marginalized children in both project design and implementation, particularly regarding learning access, participation, and outcomes, while also highlighting the challenges that need to be addressed by the SSDP.

The SSDP is designed for systemic intervention that impacts all children; however, vulnerable children were given priority in the project document. The consultation and sharing process regarding such a large project with vulnerable communities or their representative organizations was necessary, but it was lacking and not conducted adequately or widely. As a result, many vulnerable children in the community were not reached by the project. The project design also lacks a clear plan for local-level capacity development, which is one of the project objectives. A significant portion of the project budget is allocated for recurrent expenses, with very little allocated for education. The project design should address this issue by increasing the budget for educational development. Additionally, the current design does not focus on quality education alongside access. It also fails to place marginalized children at the center, leading to a lack of a fully equitable design.

The implementation of the project also has room for improvement in terms of access to learning, participation, and learning outcomes for marginalized children. We found that the incentive schemes for marginalized children have limited effect, especially since they are not need-based, such as scholarships. The midday meal program does not adequately reach all needy children. Other indirect costs like uniforms, stationery, and transportation are not provided, and poor families cannot afford these expenses. Social exclusion based on caste, gender, geography, and ethnic origin still exists in many explicit and implicit forms, although it is decreasing. Infrastructure, teaching materials, and assessments that accommodate disabled children are still lacking in most schools. Children engaged in labor or seasonal migration miss out on access and participation, leading to low outcomes. School infrastructure, as well as teaching and non-teaching staff, are insufficient in both quantity and quality. Mother tongue education is not being implemented properly. Most schools are not adequately prepared for emergencies like natural disasters. It has been observed that schools are poorly governed and receive insufficient funding. The teaching and learning process remains very traditional and not child-friendly in most schools. Institutional support and parental involvement for marginalized children are minimal, resulting in low learning outcomes. Therefore, the project lacks equitable access, participation, and outcomes.

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Introduction

The School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), designed to provide quality school education to all children, is one of the significant initiatives undertaken by the government of Nepal in the education sector. It is the successor program to the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP). The SSDP is a seven-year program that commenced in mid-2016 and encompasses systemic interventions throughout Nepal. Its aims include improving teaching, learning, and student outcomes; enhancing equitable access to basic and secondary education; and strengthening the education system, sector planning, management, and governance. The program follows the Sector-Wide Approach (SWAp), where the government and development partners jointly finance the sector. The World Bank (WB) is a key development partner, providing funding through IDA, GPE, and other sources and offering technical assistance to the government of Nepal in the education sector. Despite systemic interventions affecting all government-aided schools and their students, the program primarily focuses on ensuring access and quality of education for marginalized children, including girls, children with disabilities, indigenous children from highly marginalized and marginalized categories, religious minority children, HIV-infected children, Dalit children, LGBTI children, Madhesi children, and others. To achieve these objectives, various interventions are implemented through SSDP. Significant progress has been made over the past decade in school education, particularly in access and quality, but there is still room for improvement. A large number of basic school-aged children remain out of school, many of whom belong to marginalized groups. The overall quality of education is questionable, and children from marginalized groups tend to perform lower compared to their counterparts. This study employed various data collection methods, including desk review, secondary data collection from different sources, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. It examines the situation regarding marginalized children's access to education, their engagement in the learning process, participation in educational activities, and the learning outcomes affecting marginalized children in Nepal.

Study Objectives and Questions

The study objectives are to:

- Examine the access and quality of school education for marginalized children during the SSDP project implementation.
- Examine whether the project has addressed the issues faced by children in marginalized communities during the (re)design and implementation phases.
- Identify the impact of the SSDP project on marginalized children's educational attainment in Nepal.
- Recommend potential interventions to redesign and narrow the policy and practice gap in the implementation of SSDP based on the evidence.

The following questions guide the study:

- Did the SSDP project consider the concerns of marginalized children at the time of (re)design of the project?
- How does SSDP ensure equitable access to school education for marginalized children?
- Are marginalized children fully participating in the process of learning at school?
- Are the learning outcomes of marginalized children equitable?

- What are the areas for improvement in policy and practice gaps in school-level education for marginalized children in Nepal?

Background

Context

Sandwiched between two of the fastest-growing economic giants, China and India, Nepal still remains among the poorest countries in the world. Despite significant development improvements over the last few decades, the country's overall growth remains at a slow pace. The federal system adopted by the Constitution of Nepal 2015 significantly decentralizes power, and school education is the responsibility of local governments. This system appears challenging since the jurisdictional boundaries of federal, provincial, and local governments have not yet been clarified. Moreover, newly elected local governments and local bureaucratic structures were not empowered enough to handle new responsibilities, and frictional relations between local government and school management negatively impacted school education. Following the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015, the macroeconomic performance has been relatively stable, which has had a positive impact on other sectors, including education.[1] The government of Nepal aspires to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs) through the development strategy 2030. The new constitution also guarantees free education up to the secondary level and compulsory education up to the basic level (grade 8). Through the fourteenth periodic plan (FY 2016/17 to FY 2018/19), the government aims to enhance access to secondary education, improve the quality of education, and increase the efficacy of the education system to produce skilled human resources.[2] Within this broad framework, the government has launched the seven-year school sector development plan (SSDP) in mid-2016, focusing on quality and access to school education. The educational policymakers of Nepal have sought to develop a high-quality public education system through multiple interventions, aiming to address three major areas: increasing equity and access, improving quality and relevance, and strengthening the institutional capacity of the system to address the first two areas.[3] A few national educational policy initiatives have been complemented by foreign aid through different bilateral and multilateral organizations, including the World Bank.

To meet the objectives of the school education system, various types of schools operate in Nepal, including community schools, institutional schools, trust schools, special schools, religious schools, and alternative schools. The figure below illustrates the distribution of schools and students across different provinces. After the new federal structure of the state, the education management

Figure 1: Provincial distribution of schools and students in Nepal

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[1] See Program Appraisal Document of SSDP, 2017, World Bank, IDA
[2] See Fourteen Plan Approach Paper, National Planning Commission, (GoN), 2016
[3] These are the objectives stated in the Nepal's large scale systemic interventions to reform education sector. For the details and further information regarding the reforms, see MoE (1990, 1991, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2008)
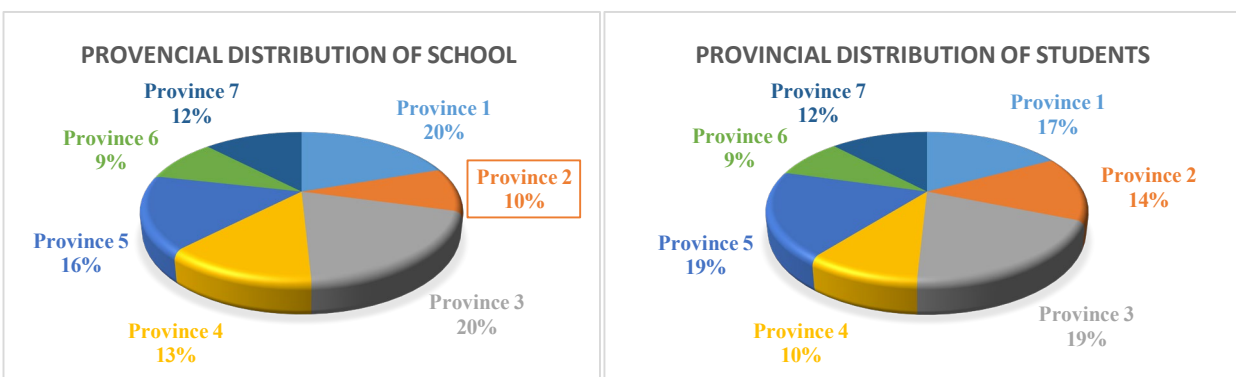
system also has been changed and adapted accordingly. The latest data shows that there are 31,800 basic schools and 8,950 secondary schools, 1,066 religious schools, 32 special schools in Nepal. The total number of government-funded schools is 31,822, with 5,233,365 students studying at the basic level and 1,114,469 students studying at the secondary level. The school-to-student ratio distributions are slightly different in provinces 1, 2, 4, and 5, as shown in Figure 1.
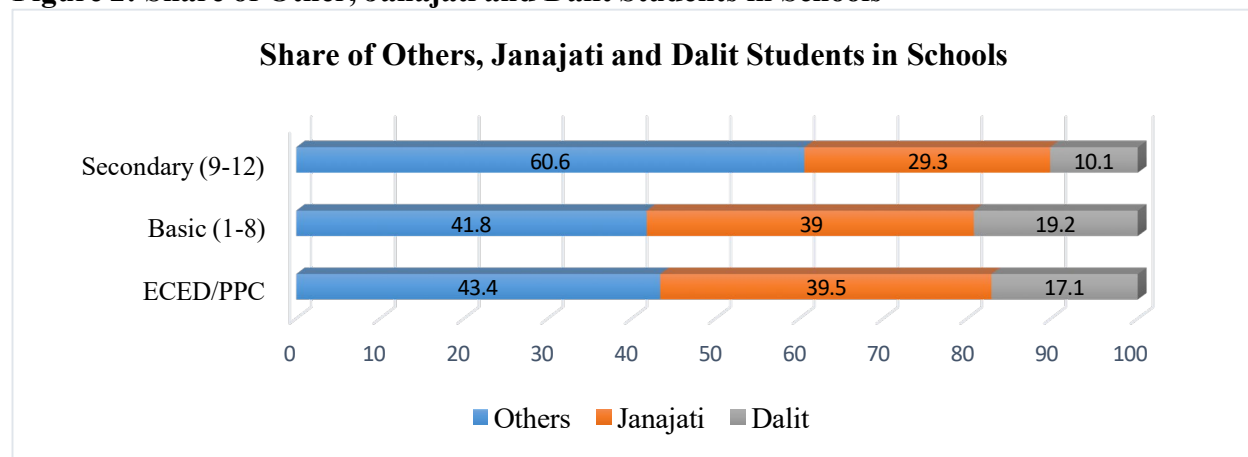
Considering the diversity of population structure, the school enrollment of marginalized groups like Dalit and Janajati students is presented in the figure below. It shows that higher the classes lower the marginalized children which indicates the higher dropout ratio.

Figure 2: Share of Other, Janajati and Dalit Students in Schools

The table below shows the general indicators of education sector which reflect the different project interventions so far and the gap to address in the educational issues..[4]

Table 1: School Level Education Indicators

ECED/PPC Level	%	Basic Level	%
Gross enrollment ratio	84.1	Net intake rate grade 1	95.9
Teacher with required qualification	93.8	Net enrollment rate (1-5)	97.2
Entrant in grade 1 with ECED experience	66.3	Net enrollment rate (1-8)	92.3
Secondary Level	**%**	Survival rate (grade 8)	77.4
Net enrollment ratio (9-12)	43.9	Completion rate (1-8)	70.7

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[4] See Flash Report, Center for Education and Human Resource Development, (CEHRD), 2018

Survival rate (grade 10)	57.1	Out of school children (5-12 age)	8.7
Survival rate (grade 12)	17.2	GPI (1-8)	1.04
GPI (9-12)	0.99		

Source: Consolidated Report, School Level Educational Statistic of Nepal, 2018

The 2011 census survey conducted by the government of Nepal has demonstrated that 26.5 million people inhabit the country, comprising 126 ethnic groups that speak 123 different languages.[5] Most of the socio-cultural and political practices in Nepal are largely discriminatory and exclusionary and are reflected in: gender; socioeconomic status; location; health and nutrition status; physical condition of the person; cast and ethnicity; language; and vulnerability of the groups.[6] With such a tradition, large numbers of people are deprived of their educational rights and equity in education remains a constant challenge in the country. There are differences in educational access and quality between rural and urban areas. The religious minority (Muslim community) has relatively weak access and quality in education. In comparison with higher cast ranks, Dalit and indigenous children have a weak position in access to education, learning participation, and learning outcomes. Despite more girls' participation in schools, the quality and transition in higher education are low. Except for children whose mother tongue is Nepali, they face difficulties in the learning process and do not progress as expected. The children with disability have even more complex problems in accessing and the quality of school education. The proportion of out-of-school children is slightly higher in the marginalized category compared to their counterparts.

Current Issues

Despite numerous initiatives and reforms in Nepal's education sector, it has yet to achieve the expected outcomes. Many issues have been addressed during the reform process, and still, many are not addressed, especially in the case of marginalized children. Some of the current issues that prevail in school educational landscape in Nepal especially on the perspective of equity in education are: incentive scheme (scholarship, mid-day meal, textbook, uniform, stationary etc.); mother tongue education and language of instruction; information of vulnerable children in EMIS; coordination between education stakeholders; disabled friendly infrastructure; curriculum, teaching and assessment for disabled children (other than physical disabled); local curriculum; enough supply of qualified teaching and non-teaching staff; jurisdiction un-clarity of local, provincial and federal government on education administration; sufficient financing on education etc.

Policy

National government policies and international monitoring instruments have a direct and indirect impact on the educational attainment of marginalized children in Nepal. The policy and practice gap are rampant across the nation; however, some grounded policies have significant educational outcomes as well. Some international instruments and national policies are discussed here, with consideration of marginalized children's education.

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[5] Central Bureau of Statistic (CBS), 2011
[6] Consolidated Equity Strategy (MoE), 2014

National Policy Context:

As a fundamental right of the nation, Article 31 of the Constitution states that education is a fundamental right of the people of the country. The article highlights that every citizen has the right to compulsory and free basic education, as well as free secondary education. It further protects the educational rights of children with disabilities by providing them with appropriate language and script, such as sign language for the deaf and braille for the visually impaired. The article ensures the rights of indigenous children to study in their own mother tongue and open the school for the promotion of the mother tongue language. The Free and Compulsory Education Act 2018 is also already enforced, and it is anticipated to complete the SSDP provision in full.

The new education act is in the process of draft and plans to be tabled in parliament in the coming sessions. The new act aims to incorporate the recent structural and political changes in the country, replacing the old one. The Education Act, Eighth Amendment 2016 of Nepal, has rationalized the new changes in the act to improve the school management with the development of quality education for all children. The Act has addressed the multiple issues in the education sector, including the concerns of marginalized and vulnerable children, such as Dalit children, children with disability, girls, domestic child labor, street children, conflict-affected children, HIV infected children, highly marginalized and engendered indigenous children. In article 6A, the provision has been mentioned regarding different modes of education such as special education, inclusive education, non-formal education, continuous education, distance education and open school education (which provides the educational opportunity to students who could not attend school regularly) to target marginalized and vulnerable children to be able to access school education.

In addition, the Inclusive Education Policy 2017 has been adopted by the Ministry of Education, with a special focus on ensuring the right to education for children with disabilities.[7] The policy has developed a comprehensive framework for access and quality of education with a disabled and child-friendly school environment. It has given emphasis to the special provisions for children with disabilities while considering the variety of languages and scripts used by different types of children.

To address the existing widespread inequality in the education sector, the Ministry of Education developed the consolidated equity strategy in 2014.[8] The aim of the strategy was to solve the deeply rooted problems. The three major equity areas have been identified as: equity in meaningful access, equity in meaningful/functional participation, and equity in meaningful learning outcomes. The strategy identified eight prominent equity dimensions, including: gender, socioeconomic status, health and nutrition status, geographical location, physical condition of the person, ethnic group and/or caste, language, and children from vulnerable groups. Some of the measures that have been recommended were incentive schemes, health, and

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[7] This new Inclusive Education Policy (2017) has replaced the Special Education Policy 1996. The latest one is more comprehensive to incorporate all other provisions made in UN conventions in which Nepal is a party and Nepal's latest changes legal framework.

[8] The strategy has been developed after wider consultation with multiple stakeholders in the education sector. The equity framework was pertinent foundation for other educational interventions. Equity Strategy (2014)

nutrition programs, advocacy and campaign, enabling learning environment, affirmative action policies and legislation, alternative education, inclusion of children with disability, and partnership and network. Despite all these policies and provisions, a significant gap remains between policy and practice in ensuring access to and quality of education for all children in the country.

The Local Government Operations Act 2017 has given the responsibility of running schools to the local government. This act also has provisions that emphasize access to and the quality of school education for marginalized children. Likewise, the government's reservation policy of 2007 has also given space to select the teaching and non-teaching staff from marginalized communities.

Intervention (SSDP)

The School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) is a seven-year educational intervention in the Nepalese school sector, initiated in mid-2016. It is a successor to the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP), which was also a seven-year program that concluded in mid-2016. The SSDP is a systemic intervention that covers the nation and works across the range of education levels from early childhood education development (ECED) through grade 12. This plan is divided into two segments, the first five years and a two-year extension.[9] As a comprehensive and given emphasis of partnership of different stakeholders in the project, SSDP is following the Sector Wide Approach (SWAp) in which the government of Nepal and many other development partners are associated.
Besides the government, the pooled development partners for the SSDP program for results are: World Bank, ADB, Australia, EU, Finland, GPE, REACH MDTF, JICA, Norway, and UNICEF.

The SSDP has a joint funding arrangement with the government of Nepal and other joint funding partners, including the World Bank. Approximately 89% of SSDP funding is provided by the government, and 11% is contributed by development partners. The total estimated cost of SSDP for the seven years is US$11312 million, and the first five years' cost is estimated at US$6461. For the first five years, the cost is estimated to be as follows: government-$5739 million, World Bank (technical assisting and coordinating DPs) (IDA)-$185 million, other joint financing partners (JFPs)/Non JFP-$293 million, and this will have $244 million financing gap for the first five years. Up to FY 2019, IDA has estimated to bear the cost of $80 million.[10]

The objective of SSDP is:
To contribute to socioeconomic development and reduce disparities in the country through the continuous and inclusive development of its human resources capacity by providing all citizens with opportunities to become functionally literate, numerate, and to develop the essential life skills and knowledge needed to enjoy a productive life, considering the diversity of contexts and needs, especially with regards to the upcoming federalization of the country by improving it.

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[9] See SSDP (2016)
[10] See Program Appraisal Document (SSDP), The World Bank (IDA), 2017

quality, equitable access and efficiency of basic and secondary education in Nepal.

The project involves three main components and results areas:
Results Area 1: Improved teaching-learning and student learning outcomes (US$4,566 million)
Results Area 2: Improved equitable access to basic and secondary education (US$965 million)
Results Area 3: Strengthened education system, sector planning, management, and governance (US$930 million)

The specific objectives and sub results areas are:

- Investing early - Improved ECED/PPE and implementation of National Early Grade Reading Program
- National curriculum framework (NCF) revised and implemented
- Assessment and examination reforms undertaken
- Improved school management and accountability system
- Improved teacher management and accountability and professional development
- Systematically assimilate information and communication technology (ICT) in school education to improve teaching and learning
- Expanding technical and vocational education (TVE) opportunities for students from low socioeconomic background
- Reduction in number of out of school children (addressing both kind of students, those who never attended schools; and those who attended school but dropped out)
- Integrated pro-poor scholarship and pro-science scholarship scheme implemented
- Enhance schools' physical infrastructure and provide children a safe, and conducive learning space
- Strengthened governance, fiduciary management, and data systems
- Central- and field-level institutional capacity strengthened

The investment of IDA is specifically focus on following six areas which are mention as disbursement linked indicators (DLIs):
- Strengthen governance, fiduciary management, data systems and institutional capacity for results based program implementation. (DLI-1)
- Improve access to basic and retention in secondary school. (DLI-2)
- National Curriculum Framework (NCF) revised and implemented. (DLI-3)
- Assessment and examination system reforms undertaken to improve teaching and learning. (DLI-4)
- Improve school management and accountability system. (DLI-5)
- Improve teacher management and accountability. (DLI-6)

The SSDP is using the government system for program implementation, oversight, financial management, procurement, safeguards, Monitoring & Evaluation, and reporting arrangements. The ministry of education, science and technology (MOEST) is served as the executing agency (EA) and have overall responsibility for policy guidance and oversight for program implementation.[11]

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[11] See Program Appraisal Document (SSDP), The World Bank (IDA), 201

Findings and Discussion

This section focuses on the findings and discussion of the study based on the data collected from different sources. This section broadly classifies and discusses the design and implementation of the project.

Project Design

This SSDP Project has also developed different plans and frameworks, including the Vulnerable Community Development Framework (VCDF), which aims to address the issues of children of vulnerable communities. The project document mentions the principal objectives of VCDF as:

> 'Ensure the participation of the vulnerable groups in the entire process of preparation, implementation, and monitoring of SSDP interventions; Define the institutional arrangement for screening of impacts on vulnerable groups, preparation and implementation of SIP in schools; and Outline the monitoring and evaluation process.'[12]

The vulnerable community is clearly defined in the document; however, it did not consider the pro-poor. As we see in society, when more than one vulnerable identity is intersected, children become even more marginalized. The SSDP considered only a linear model of identifying the vulnerable group; however, the social reality is more complex and should be considered at the design phase.

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[12] See Vulnerable Community Development Framework, 2016, MoE

As mentioned in the objectives and guiding principles of the development of VCDF, there should be institutional arrangements for screening the impact on vulnerable communities; however, such a provision has not been seen in practice. Although some degree of disaggregated data has been collected from schools, it appears not to adequately address the issues of vulnerable children and meet the objectives of SSDP. Another important principle for addressing vulnerable communities is social mapping, which is also not actively practiced. In the design phase, a periodic social mapping arrangement should also be included in the project's structure. Due to the rapid changes and migration in society, the significance of social mapping is increasing for the effective implementation of the project. The existing education management information system (EMIS) can also be restructured to incorporate social mapping data.

Projects without good stakeholder consultation are setting themselves up for failure. Those who consult widely increase their chances of success. Early local participation can also be cost-effective in the long run.[13] However, it has been found that the lack of sufficient quality consultation with stakeholders, especially with vulnerable communities and their organizations. As a principle and objective of VCDF, meaningful consultation with vulnerable groups is required to ensure their participation in the entire process of project preparation, implementation, and monitoring; however, the necessary education consultation has not been carried out. Many respondents in this study were not aware of this project before it was implemented; therefore, they considered it an imposing project. A lack of meaningful consultation means the project is less likely to be successful in terms of ownership. Likewise, SSDP lacks a structural design for involving the vulnerable community in the project's implementation and monitoring. At the time of project design, mandatory provision of vulnerable group involvement in project implementation and monitoring should be incorporated into the project structure. Moreover, although the limited consultation conducted during the design phase has not been widely disseminated, a wider disclosure of the findings is required through various media for further improvement and ownership of the project.

Capacity enhancement is one of three key programs for result areas, which should be integrated into project design as a vital component. Capacity-building activities for district and school-level stakeholders were included in the project design; however, the project lacked a clearly defined and strategically prioritized capacity development plan, especially at the local level. Institutional capacity was poorly defined, and no outcomes were established to measure progress toward the goal. This was a major design flaw in a low-capacity environment like Nepal. Low capacity at all levels and weak internal controls limited the SWAp's effectiveness as a funding tool. There are ongoing concerns about the ability of central, district, and local entities (e.g., school management committees) to implement the SWAp. Additionally, questions remain about sustainability, given that these processes are highly top-down.

SSDP has given attention on both access and quality of education, however, the question on quality of education is still not satisfactory. Given the slow progress in improving the quality of education with continued donor support, insufficient emphasis was placed on improving the quality of education. Activities supporting early childhood development focused on establishing

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[13] See IFAD (2000), A Guide for Project M&E

of centers with little emphasis on the quality of provision. The same is happening in basic and secondary education as well. These things could be addressed to put more emphasis on quality assurance during the project design phase.

The new constitution has given local governments greater responsibility for school education. At the time of SSDP design, the local elected body did not exist. Now, there is much greater expectation from local governments; therefore, at the time of project design, engagement with the local government body should be ensured. Local government is one of the strong players in the school education sector. It has already been conflict in the jurisdiction of the local, provincial, and federal governments in the school educational issues. Engagement of local government is also required to reduce the frictional relations between local government and school management.

The design of SSDP appears unbalanced in terms of funding for the recurrent and development budgets of the education sector. A significant portion of the SSDP budget is allocated to recurrent expenses of school management, and a smaller amount is dedicated to educational development. However, increasing the funding for the development budget is crucial to overcome and address current issues in the education sector. When designing, the budgeting aspect should be taken seriously and incorporated properly. As the evaluation system for student achievement shifts to a letter grading system, teachers' training modalities need to be revamped. SSDP design should consider the teacher training for the newly adapted letter grading system. Likewise, the CAS system was also not properly implemented and requires continuous support from teachers and the school system. To enhance the quality of students' achievement, CAS should prioritize and provide continuous reinforcement in the project design structure.

Project Implementation

SSDP aims to enhance access to and the quality of education for all children in the country, with a particular emphasis on marginalized children. To achieve its aim, SSDP employs various strategies to implement the program. Nepal is a highly diverse society where education inequalities have been widespread. To address these inequalities, the approach of equity has been adopted in previous educational interventions as well. The Consolidated Equity Strategy 2014 also identified significant equity areas and outlined a strategy to address them through various interventions. SSDP is also following the same strategy to address school educational inequality issues. This study examines the equity strategy areas and assesses the implementation status of these areas, particularly for marginalized children. The primary areas of exploration for this study are: equity in meaningful access, equity in meaningful participation or engagement in the process, and equity in meaningful learning outcomes for marginalized children. The subsequent chapters deal with these three major areas and discuss them accordingly.

Equity in Access
Despite efforts by both the government and non-governmental organizations to increase access to school education for all children, a considerable number of children still remain out of school. During the Education for All (EFA) period (2001-2015), especially within the first five years of the SSRP implementation, the education sector experienced a notable increase in access. However, data shows that a specific group of children remains unreached and

these groups are disproportionately students from poor, remote, low caste families or disadvantaged ethnicities, Muslim girls, vulnerable groups, and children with disabilities, etc. One of the government officers says, 'To reach out to the marginalized community is critical, and only the education sector's effort is not enough for that; there must be a multi-sector effort to address the educational issues that are interlinked.'[14] The effort to strengthen equal opportunities for all marginalized children and ensure their full cycle completion of school education is becoming crucial and challenging for the government and non-government sector in education. To address the issues of access, it targets the group of children who have never attended school, have dropped out, and are at risk of dropping out. The multiple barriers to equity in access have been observed in the field and mainly are poverty; social exclusion linked to cast, ethnicity and vulnerable group; disability, migration and child labor; social norms and gender bias; supply constraints (school infrastructure, staffing and geographical location); language; emergencies and civil strife; and governance and financing bottleneck.

Poverty is one of the most significant barriers to education in Nepal. Even though the government provides free education, indirect costs such as transport, uniforms, stationery, and other school-related expenses that the government does not cover can make school unaffordable for poor families. To address the issue of poverty in access to education, the government has launched an incentive scheme that covers scholarships for vulnerable groups, including girls, Dalits, highly marginalized and endangered indigenous children, children from remote and deprived areas of the Karnali Zone, and children with disabilities. The scholarship is provided in a blanket approach, which does not consider disparities among vulnerable groups, and the scholarship amount is insufficient to cover the indirect costs of schooling and does not reach all children from the poorest families. It is likely that scholarships often do not reach their intended beneficiaries and are not spent properly for educational purposes, particularly when parents/guardians are unaware of their eligibility. Some school management also sometimes misuse the scholarship funds allocated to vulnerable children. One of the local government education officers states that 'Local government can not afford any additional cost for education; we will provide only those things allotted by the federal government.'[15] It seems that many local governments do not prioritize the education agenda. Likewise, the government has provided free textbooks to all children, which are delivered on time in most schools, and provides mid-day meals only in select schools. Midday meals were effective for primary school children from the poorest families; however, the budget was significantly cut in recent years, which has had an adverse effect on enrollment and the continuity of children in school. One of the parents says, 'School does not provide meals for our kids, so I don't send my kids to school. When they grow up, then only will send.'[16] One of the grade 6 vulnerable students says:

> 'We come from a low-income background. My father died, and my mother does labor work. My mother's income is enough only for food and clothes for my mother, me, and my sister. I want to pursue higher education in a technical field and become a doctor, but my mother says I need to earn money soon. I also need to support my mother, so I am a little afraid that I may not be able to continue my studies. We should not pay a fee, and we get a free textbook, but do not get mid-day meal, stationery, and uniform support.'[17]

In some of the schools' mid-day meals, stationery and uniforms are provided with the support of other social organizations and individual donors as well. One of the head teachers says, 'We get

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[14] Interview with government education officer
[15] Interview with government education officer
[16] Interview with parents
[17] Interview with children

stationery and uniform support from some of our alumni members and some civil society organizations.'[18]

Considering the facts, poverty is a significant barrier to access to educational equity, and there is a correlation between educational and economic status. Moreover, poverty in Nepal is closely linked to social exclusion- that is, caste-based discrimination, disadvantaged position of women and girls, disadvantage due to disability, ethnicity, and language.

Social exclusion is another significant factor that prevents certain groups of people from attending school. Nepal is a very diverse country with 126 cast and ethnic groups and 123 languages spoken as a mother tongue.[19] Though in decreasing tendency, discrimination still exists in some areas and certain groups in society, including school, especially towards Dalit, highly marginalized indigenous, and vulnerable groups' children, despite laws against such discrimination. One of the school's parents/management committee chairs states:

> In our school, a significant majority of children are from poor economic backgrounds, Dalit, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups. People from high-class and rich families send their kids to private schools. Being less powerful in society, it is difficult to get help for the school from different stakeholders.'[20]

When examining the out-of-school children (OOSC) ratio across all three categories—never been in school, school dropout, and potential to drop out—the share of Dalit and vulnerable groups is notably high. The latest data in the figure below displays the proportion of OOSC in Nepal.

PERCENTAGE OF OUT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN IN AGE (5-16) AND ETHNIC CATAGORY
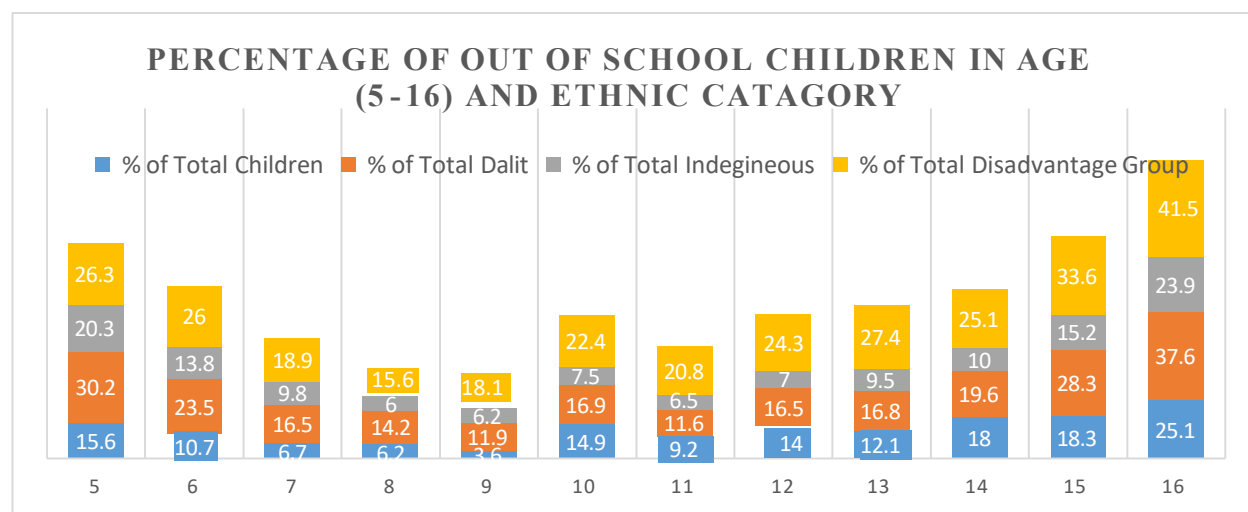
Source: Consolidated Report, School Level Educational Statistics in Nepal, (CEHRD), 2018

The figure presents the data in terms of age (5-16 years) and ethnic category, including Dalit, indigenous, disadvantaged groups, and the total number of children. In the beginning, the OOSC ratio is high and decreases up to the age of 10-11and increases after that. The highest portion of OOSC is from the disadvantaged group, followed by Dalit, indigenous, and others. We also have the highest rate of dropout students from the disadvantaged, Dalit, and indigenous categories. As soon as they reach the lower secondary and secondary levels, there is a high chance of dropping out and going to the labor market because of their low economic condition' states one of the head teachers. The non-Dalit Muslim caste has the highest

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[18] Interview with head teacher
[19] See Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) Report 2011
[20] Interview with school management committee (SMC) chair

number of OOSC accounting for 14.3% of total OOSC. Among Dalit castes with high proportion of children not attending school: dom (58.4%), musahar (51.3%), kalkhor (44.7%), kori (35.3%), dusadh/paswan/pasi (35%) etc.[21] Although there are policies for no discrimination based on religion, race, gender, caste, and tribe, VCDF also emphasizes commitment to free education for girls and Dalits, along with hiring teachers from Dalit, madhesi, and janajati groups. However, it seems there is a lack of initiatives to promote tolerance among all people to reduce discrimination on the basis of caste and class. Additionally, Dalit and janajati teachers at the secondary level or below account for only 4.5% and 19.2%, respectively, indicating a smaller proportion of Dalit and janajati teachers in schools.

Children with *disabilities* in Nepal are deprived of education, basic health services, early intervention, rehabilitation, and many other types of special support, which they are entitled to as citizens, as they face infrastructural barriers, social discrimination, and discriminatory ill treatment in the family, and rejection from schools. The prevailing negative attitudes of society towards children with disabilities present a major obstacle to their inclusion and participation in education.[22] However, some of the schools provide education to children with disability. 32 special schools, a few more inclusive schools, and nearly 300 resource centers are operating to provide education to children with disability. Among children with special needs, 30.6% are not attending school.[23] Children with multiple disabilities are more likely to be out of school. Our observation during this study is that almost all schools lack disabled-friendly infrastructure, including buildings, desks, benches, and toilets. Only a few newly made buildings have disabled access infrastructure on the ground floor. One of the head teachers remarks:

> 'our school is not disabled friendly. One new building under construction is disabled friendly only on the ground floor. Toilets are also not disabled-friendly, but newly constructed ones will be disabled friendly. It is a little bit difficult for children with disability in many ways. We are sensitive towards children with disability and will make the new construction disability-friendly. I think in most of schools have the same case.'[24]

Only a disabled-friendly school infrastructure is not enough. Other public infrastructure is also equally important for accessing education in schools. Other public and private constructions should consider disabled friendly infrastructure. Moreover, curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment are also not friendly to children with disability (other than physical disability like visual impairment, hearing impairment, multiple disabilities, etc). Despite many policies regarding children with disability, effective implementation is still lacking. There are still children with disabilities who remain unidentified. It is found that there is a lack of early identification systems in health centers, ECD centers, and early primary grades education. It has been found that not enough teachers are trained in inclusive education, and specialized teachers often focus on specific disabilities. Considering geography, commuting time, and distance, residential schools with fully accessible and disability-friendly infrastructure are required to incorporate all children with disabilities in the school.

Child labor and migration are important causes of children being out of school. It also affects children who work but continue to attend school. The different types of work and duration of

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[21] See Global Initiative for Out of School Children, UNICEF, 2016

[22] See Global Initiative for Out of School Children, UNICEF, 2016

[23] See Global Initiative for Out of School Children, UNICEF, 2016

[24] Interview with Head Teacher

work, along with long working hours and hazardous work activities, has a detrimental effect on student engagement and participation in the learning process. One of the domestic child laborers attending school says:

> I do domestic work in other people's houses in the morning and evening, and come to school during the day. Although these works are not hazardous, they affect my study progress. Because of poor progress in my studies, there is a little pressure for me to leave my studies and fully engage in work.'[25]

Dropping out due to child labor is therefore not necessarily a switch from school to work, but may be a gradual process of disengagement from school.

There are 37% of children aged 5-17 years engaged in child labor, and the majority belong to the poorest wealth quintile.[26] There is a legal restriction on child labor and a ban on bonded labor; however, child labor is still prevalent in many social fronts. Most of the working children in Nepal are involved in agricultural activities. The main industries employing bonded labor in Nepal are agriculture, domestic work, brick kilns, and the stone breaking industry, while some forms of forced labor also include the embroidered textile industry. There is still no reliable data on the number of street children and seasonal migrants. Most of the brick kiln workers are seasonal migrants, and children, often accompanied by their families, are also engaged in the work rather than attending school. One of the head teachers states: 'At the beginning of the academic year, they get admission and move to brick kilns and come back to almost the end of the academic year, which is creating a problem for school management and their learning as well.'[27] Other work-related temporary migration also has a direct and indirect effect on the access of marginalized children to school education. It seems that there is a lack of serious initiative aimed at bringing children engaged in child labor and street children back to school. Very negligible efforts like flexible schooling have been seen, but more significant efforts are required to address the issues of child labor and migration, connecting with school education.

Social norms and gender biases are another discriminatory practice that prevents girls from accessing and completing the full school cycle. Due to the socially and culturally defined roles and perceptions towards gender roles, inequalities in education exist in terms of meaningful access. Both census and household survey data show that girls are more likely to be out of school. Cultural attitudes that girls' education is less important than boys' education still prevail. This also reinforces the practice of families in giving more value to their sons' education and sending them to private schools, which are perceived to be of better quality, while girls are sent to public schools or non-formal classes. The head teacher of one community school expressed:

> 'We have 60% female and 40% male students enrolled in our school. Many parents have admitted their sons to private schools and their daughters to community schools. In their perception, private schools are better; however, we maintain the quality of education. Although it is decreasing, I still found slight discrimination between girls and boys.'[28]

The practice of child marriage is another social issue that is hampering girls' education. The practice of child marriage for girls and the traditional view of girls as someone else's property prevent families from valuing girls' education as equally important. Such attitudes and beliefs not only impact girls' school participation, but also have an impact on girls' perception of themselves and their role in society, and the extent to which they themselves

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[25] Interview with student
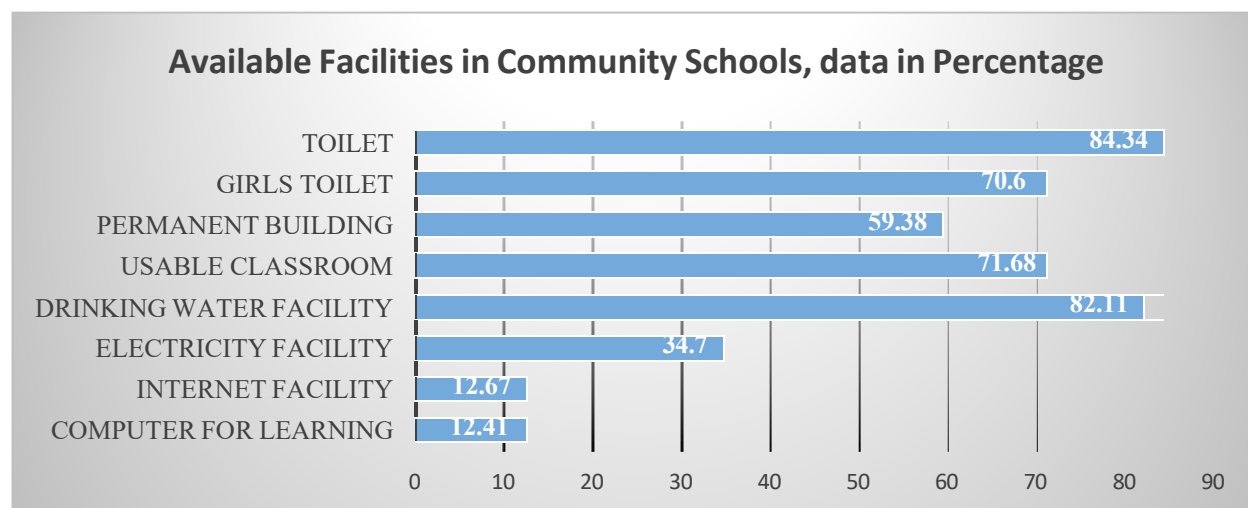[26] See Nepal Living Standard Survey, 2014
[27] Interview with head teacher
[28] Interview with head teacher

consider education as important and relevant. As soon as the girl gets married, their education is highly likely to discontinue. Some exceptionally good cases also happen. One of the parents states:

> After getting married, my daughter stayed at our home and continued her studies, as her husband had gone abroad for work. School teachers also support us in continuing my daughter's education. My daughter and I are happy with this.'[29]

The data show that 18.7% of girls aged 5-9 years were out of school, compared to 17.1% of boys. For the lower secondary school age group (10-12 years), 10.4% of girls were out of school, compared to 7.7% of boys. This evidence highlights the disparity between girls and boys in school attendance. Moreover, 48.5% of women aged 20-49 years were married before the age of 18. The rate of child marriage is highest in rural areas, at 52.1%, in the midwestern region, 67.5% and in the central terai, 65.9%.[30] Despite legislative provisions against child marriage and scholarship for girls at school, there is still a lack of strategies or effective campaigns to change perceptions and attitudes towards girls and their education. Approximately 30% of schools lack separate toilets for girls and boys. The country has a very low literacy rate among women. Gender disparity occurs not only between males and females but also in other sexual minorities like the LGBTI group. LGBTI groups also have many issues with access to education, which need to be addressed through equitable intervention.

Supply constraint specially school infrastructure and staffing, also have an impact on access to school education to marginalized children. Constraints in school infrastructure, poor quality facilities, and a lack of teachers and staff are major barriers that affect the quality of education and could push children out of school. Most of the schools lack enough learning resources, playground, science laboratory, library, clean drinking water etc. The figure below shows the condition of facilities in community schools in Nepal. Lack of facilities may lead to compromise

Available Facilities in Community Schools, data in Percentage

Facility	Percentage
TOILET	84.34
GIRLS TOILET	70.6
PERMANENT BUILDING	59.38
USABLE CLASSROOM	71.68
DRINKING WATER FACILITY	82.11
ELECTRICITY FACILITY	34.7
INTERNET FACILITY	12.67
COMPUTER FOR LEARNING	12.41

Source: Flash Report 2017

in quality and eventually may contribute to pushing children out of school. One of the students says:

> 'in our school, we do not have laboratory, library, computer lab and even do not have regular supply of clean drinking water. Our desk and benches are also very old and broken, sometimes our clothes are torn by the pin of the bench. We don't have a playground, so do not play. Because of lack of classroom, we are taught at

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[29] Interview with parents
[30] See Global Initiative for Out of School Children, UNICEF, 2016

balcony of one of the classrooms. The school's buildings are also old, and we are afraid that they will fall down.'[31]

In only few model schools, satisfactory infrastructure and facilities are available. We can say it has uneven availability and quality of school infrastructure throughout the country. Likewise, there is short supply of teacher as well. The specific subject teacher especially for math and science is lacking. One of head teacher says: 'we have lack of subject teachers in lower secondary and secondary level. We are raising this problem since so long but government does not put full effort to solve this problem of supply constraint of teachers.'[32] In some schools there are more than sufficient teachers in primary level but insufficient subject teachers in lower secondary and secondary level. About 6% and 19% of teachers from primary and lower secondary level teachers are untrained or partially trained. Teacher absenteeism is also another problem and who are present they also do not spend full time in the class. It has been observed that there is lack of qualified ECD/PPC teachers and facilitators. In most of the schools there is serious lack of effective implementation of school improvement plan.

Language has played a crucial role in the education system in Nepal. According to the 2011 census, 123 mother languages are spoken in Nepal. The official language, Nepali, is the mother tongue of 44.6% population. Other major languages in the country include Maithali 11.7%, Bhojpuri 5.8%, Tharu 5.8%, and Tamang 5.1%. There are also a number of languages spoken by only 1 to 3percent of the population. The issue of language is not only a matter of the mother tongue, but it has become a deeper and wider issue, encompassing the incorporation of other marginalized groups. The language for children with disability is another issue that is overlooked in the larger canvas of language issues in the education sector. People are more drawn to the English language rather than any other language for teaching and learning at school, which is another issue in recent decades. Many community schools have already started teaching in the English language, which is also the demand of parents. One of the head teachers says:

We have already started teaching kids the English language. If we do not start teaching in English, most children will likely attend private schools, and we will have no children. It is a demand of parents.'[33]

At the same time, a non-Nepali speaker has difficulty engaging in the class. One of the teachers states: 'One new kid in the ECD class did not speak for two days. We came to know through his friend that he did not understand anything that we spoke in the class since he is from a Tamang (one of the indigenous) background.'[34] Despite the provision to learn in the mother tongue, such a provision is still not fully practiced. The lack of teaching and learning aids in local languages is another constraint in teaching in the mother tongue. Currently, 24 different mother tongue language textbooks have been developed up to grade three, and 69 mother tongue languages are used as a means of instruction. Sign language and Braille for children with disability are still not widely used and developed for all concerned children. Non-Nepali speakers tend to have lower learning outcomes compared to their counterparts. Mother tongue instruction is also limited due to the lack of local language teachers. A lack of awareness among parents about the importance of learning in their mother tongue also has an adverse effect on children's learning outcomes.

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[31] Interview with student
[32] Interview with head teacher
[33] Interview with head teacher
[34] Interview with ECD teacher

Language spoken at home and school has a significant impact on children's learning process. As we know, Nepal is highly diverse, and data show that 123 languages are spoken in Nepal; some of them have their own scripts, while others do not. The national language, Nepali, is predominantly used in schools, and textbooks are also developed in the Nepali language. However, in recent years, most parents have requested that schools offer classes in English as the medium of instruction. In some cases, especially for children from an indigenous background, they are facing challenges at school to understand properly the content and methods of instruction. The language used at their home and the language used at school are different. With the realization of the importance of mother tongue language and the policy provision of that, there is still reluctance to introduce mother tongue language education. Many stakeholders are confused about language use in schools. So far, the Curriculum Development Center has developed textbooks for 24 indigenous languages, and 69 languages are in practice as a medium of instruction wherever necessary. One of the government education officers remarks:

> 'Mother tongue education is demand-driven. Policy also allows to provide mother tongue education, and we also orient stakeholders to prepare for that; however, parents wanted their kids to study in English and Nepali.'[35]

Still, education stakeholders have been unable to convince parents and frontline stakeholders of the benefits of mother tongue education, and low levels of performance are attributed to the different languages used at home and school. One of the parents says: 'We wanted our kids to study in English and Nepali. They will learn our mother tongue at home. After completing the study, they need to enter the job market and face competition. To face that competition in the future, they need to learn English and Nepali.'[36] It seems the language issue is still not properly addressed at the policy-making level and the practice level. The importance of multilingual education lies in its relevance to the Nepalese context. The recent phenomenon of English entice is causing more problems because of teachers' weak command of the English language. In our fieldwork, we found that many children could not express themselves in a language other than their mother tongue, which seriously hampers their full participation in the learning process and eventually leads to low performance or even dropping out.

Emergencies and civil strife pose another significant challenge for the education sector. Nepal is prone to disasters caused by natural hazards, including floods, landslides, droughts, cold waves, disease outbreaks, and earthquakes. In addition to death and destruction, emergencies also lead to large-scale displacements and put children at great risk. Such emergencies impact the education sector through the destruction of school infrastructure and the loss of school days for children.[37] The recent earthquake in 2015 has affected over one million students. Every year, thousands of families and children in Nepal are vulnerable to disasters caused by natural hazards, including floods, landslides, droughts, cold waves, disease outbreaks, and earthquakes. One of the parents states: 'Because of the flood, our kids could not go to school for a month, and all their books and stationery were destroyed. We need to buy their education materials again.'[38] Although a comprehensive disaster risk management plan is in place and a school safety thematic group is in place, schools have yet to be upgraded to cope with the occurrence of natural disasters. In total, 8242 community schools

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[35] Interview with government education officer
[36] Interview with parents
[37] See Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children South Asia Regional Study, UNICEF ROSA, 2014
[38] Interview with parents

have been affected by the 2015 earthquake, with 25134 classrooms fully destroyed and another 22097 are partially damaged.[39] Still, a significant number of schools are running in temporary learning centers. Likewise, schools are declared zones of peace, but sporadic civil strife is hindering children's education. School as a zone of peace enforcement seems a challenge.

Governance and financial bottlenecks have been directly affecting the school education system. At the time of designing SSDP, the local elected body did not exist; however, it has now been functioning for more than two years. However, the capacity of local elected government is relatively low. The new constitution has given the local government heavy responsibility and rights to operate the school system, but the resources and capacity of local governments are limited. Even some local governments prioritize other developmental activities over education. In many municipalities, we have seen frictional relations between the elected local government and the school management committee. One of the SMC chairs says: 'The municipality is not very cooperative towards us. They did not allocate the local budget for education due to a significant lack of resources. They disburse only the budget allocated by the federal government. Their priority is not education.'[40] In contrast, another municipality's school head teacher says: 'The municipality is very much cooperative with us. They have prioritized education as a key agenda item. The allotted budget for mid-day meal, stationery, uniform, teachers' salary, etc., which the federal government did not give.'[41] But it is necessary to strengthen and empower the municipality and school management committee governance system. Likewise, the government is spending only 4% of its GDP and 11% of its spending on the education sector. This represents a very low investment in such a high-priority sector, although the share of spending in education is the highest compared to other sectors. The education sector is hindered by weak public financial management, including the late release of funds, reporting delays, and poor financial record-keeping by schools. Many financial embezzlement cases have been reported. Enhancing capacity is becoming challenging in this sector.

Equity in Learning Participation

Engagement of children in the learning process is important not only for learning outcomes but also for reducing the dropout rate. Participation in the learning process has seen disproportionate rates among marginalized children and other children. The public education system continues to experience a high dropout rate and low transition from the basic to the secondary level, which appears to be another challenge for stakeholders.[42] Participation of students is not enough for learning outcomes; rather, participation of other front-line and secondary stakeholders is equally crucial for all children's learning. Some of the aspects are critical to consider for ensuring effective participation of children in school, these are as: teaching, learning and assessment; teacher, interrelationship between teacher and students and students; parents' engagement and home environment; language of learning; institutional/school support and collective effort of all stakeholders etc.

Teaching, learning, and assessment are the core processes where learners' active participation plays a vital role in achieving desired outcomes. It has been observed that pedagogical

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[39] See Global Initiative for Out of School Children, UNICEF, 2016
[40] Interview with School Management Committee Chair
[41] Interview with Head Teacher
[42] See Consolidated Equity Strategy, DoE, 2014

system is traditional and lacks student-centricity. Still, most of the schools are running only classroom-based teaching and learning methods. Only following one-way lecture methods has treated students as passive recipients rather than active learners. One head teacher remarks:

> 'we could not adopt complete participatory methods of learning. We are basically following the lecture method, and our teaching is not fully child-friendly or student-centric. The main reason could be the methodology of teacher training and the university's process for grooming teachers. Most teachers were unable to do innovative work in the classroom; instead, they repeated previous work rhetorically. Moreover, we were unable to fully implement the continuous assessment system (CAS) in its essence. It should be a formative process; however, it is understood differently (no fail system) by teachers. If we could implement the CAS system properly, the quality of learning outcomes would be far better.'[43]

The assessment system is also not a scientific approach. On one hand, the CAS system is not following properly, and on the other hand, the newly adopted letter grade system also creates confusion among students and teachers. Most teachers are unfamiliar with the letter grade system and require training. Moreover, the same assessment system for all children does not appear to be equitable. Especially in the case of children with disability, the assessment should be different, which is not happening now. One of the children with disability expressed that:

> Although we are participating in all steps of the learning process, there are still some limitations for children with disability like me. The assessment system should be different for children with disability at different levels. Some sort of flexibility is given, but the current assessment system is not fully disabled friendly for all types of children with disability.'[44]

Based on observations and interactions with various stakeholders, it is evident that there should be a significant change in teaching methodology, the method of engaging learners, and the assessment system for students' progress and outcomes. There is a serious lack of innovativeness among teachers, and a corresponding institutional environment is missing. Despite the emphasis on child-centric and child-friendly teaching and learning methods, these approaches have not been widely adopted in most schools. Few exceptional schools mention a child-friendly environment, which cannot be generalized.

A teacher is another pivotal component in the learning process, having a significant impact on ensuring student engagement. In most cases, teachers have taken the training and participated in capacity-building programs; however, the teacher training methodology and content itself need to be revamped. The current government teacher training institute cannot meet the present requirements for the knowledge and skills of teachers. Moreover, the universities, where teachers are trained academically for the teaching profession, also have many critical questions regarding imparting knowledge and skills to future teachers. One of the professors of the university states: 'Our teacher grooming and preparing process is very traditional and outdated. We urgently need to rethink the methodology and content of teachers' preparation in both academic and non-academic settings.'[45] Other pressing issues are the scarcity of subject teachers at the lower secondary and secondary levels, and the proportional distribution of teachers. It is found that there is a significant gap between the demand and supply of subject teachers, such as math and science, and the distribution is also unequal. Teachers are more concentrated in urban areas. Such a condition has a huge impact on students'

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[43] Interview with head teacher
[44] Interview with children with disability
[45] Interview with professor of education, Tribhuvan University

participation in learning process and likely to be under performing and even drop out. Likewise, numbers of teachers from marginalized community is very less which does not meet the proportionate ration.

The teacher-student relationship has been smooth and cordial; however, in some cases, teachers are discriminatory in terms of gender, cast, economic status, and disability. Such a discriminatory case is not explicit, but rather tacit, and the goal of the school system should be zero tolerance of discriminatory practice. Still, in some schools, some of the teachers are practicing corporal punishment on students. The relationship between students also seems harmonious. Few negligible bullying cases have been reported, but these were not major; however, periodic, continuous orientation is required for students, teachers, and other stakeholders. In most cases, teachers are willing to provide additional support to students. One of the students' remarks: 'Our teachers are helpful. I always ask him outside of regular class if I am confused about some problems in the subjects. And they are helpful to all students.'[46] Such additional support is demand-driven; if students need it, they should take the initiative. In some cases, teachers are reluctant to provide additional support to students.

Parents' support and home environment are essential complementary support systems to engage children in the learning process. Most of the marginalized children in community schools are from working-class people who belong to the lower or lower-middle class. Parents' educational level is also low. During this study, we found that most of the parents are. Parents were unable to support their children with their academic issues. Although parents are willing to support their children's education, their low income prevents them from affording the required study materials, such as stationery, uniforms, transportation, and other indirect school costs. When they grow up, parents expect them to enter the workforce and earn a living. Such an expectation is obvious; however, there may be a chance of discontinuation of education or low-quality performance in educational pursuits. Most of the lower secondary and secondary drop-out cases are happening for this reason. Moreover, the home environment of children also equally affects their engagement in the learning process. Due to poverty, they lack sufficient space at home and must accommodate many people in a small area, which prevents children from completing their homework and other academic tasks at home. The Early Grade Reading Program (EGRP) was initiated in 2016 in a few districts that aim to foster and promote the reading skills and capacities of children in grades 1 to 3. The program was effective during implementation, but it became slow and almost stopped after 2 years' implementation. One of the teachers expressed:

> When the EGRP program started to implement, it was good that students' performance was high, and parents were also supportive. Once it is over, it again returns to its original stage, and students' performance declines. EGRP helps parents and children manage the home environment and parents' involvement in children's study.'[47]

Such a program has a greater impact on children's education to educate parents and create a home environment along with community participation in the whole process; however, continuity is the main problem, and there does not seem to be a strong zeal among stakeholders to continue such an effective program once the project phase is over.

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[46] Interview with student
[47] Interview with head teacher

Institutional support to participate in the learning process of all children is one of the prominent issues in contemporary school educational discourse. The recent research done by the educational review office revealed that more than 85% schools are performing poorly, which indicates that schools and other educational institutions are not performing as well as they should. School as a learning center, children from different backgrounds expect full support in many ways. In terms of engaging children, schools' role is primary and obligatory to provide the required services to all children. It is anticipated to provide additional coaching if necessary, providing learning materials that are basic and fundamental support. At the same time, availability and use of laboratory, library, and technology are further important to strengthen the learning process and contribute to the desired outcome. However, such institutional support seems to be lacking in most of the schools. One of the students remarks:

> We rarely get additional coaching, we need to pay an additional fee for that, and it is difficult to get money from home since we are from a low-income background. Some teachers provide helpful additional support, but it is not sufficient. We never see a laboratory or a library. Learning materials are also very limited, and some of the materials are dumped in the teachers' room.'[48]

During the field visit, we also observed a lack of learning materials and other necessary items. In some schools, these materials are donated by individual and organizational donors but are not utilized. Most schools are not operating in a proactive manner, but rather in a traditional rhetoric way. The use of technology is rare; only some model schools utilize it, and most schools lack a minimum level of technology infrastructure. One of the SMC chairs states: 'We lack resources. Although we created a school improvement plan (SIP), we were unable to implement it as planned due to a lack of resources. The politicization of school management is also a problem in our context. Because of a lack of resources, we could not provide health services to children and were not able to provide mid-day meals for poor children.'[49] To ensure the participation of marginalized children in the learning process, such provisions are required, and basic support of the school is mandatory.

The new constitution has made provision for school education to be a responsibility of the local government; however, there are still many rights and responsibilities that remain with the provincial and federal governments. To ensure the participation of children in the learning process, the support of the local government is equally important. Some of the newly elected local governments have put the education agenda as a high priority and are providing significant support (allocating resources and periodic monitoring) to schools. However, most local governments give education the lowest priority, as they are more focused on other developmental work. Unfortunately, a significant number of financial embezzlement and policy corruption cases in the education sector at the local level have been reported. In collaboration with the school and local government, the participation of children with disabilities and those from distant areas should provide an inclusive mode of education. School mapping is also an important agenda that can be addressed collectively; however, such efforts are not being implemented properly, which prevents marginalized children from participating in the learning process. The collective institutional support of all stakeholders is necessary for achieving the desired outcomes of improved school performance and educational justice for all marginalized children.

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[48] Interview with a student
[49] Interview with school management committee chair

Equity in Learning Outcomes

A disparity in learning outcomes is clearly evident among students from different backgrounds. In aggregate, marginalized children have limited input and reduced participation in the learning process, which may result in lower learning outcomes. The Government of Nepal initiated a periodic, systematic survey of national student achievement assessments following the establishment of the Education Review Office in 2010. Such a large-scale survey follows modern theories, such as item response theory, which is considered the most scientific method of measuring student achievement. Some of the findings are shared in subsequent paragraphs.
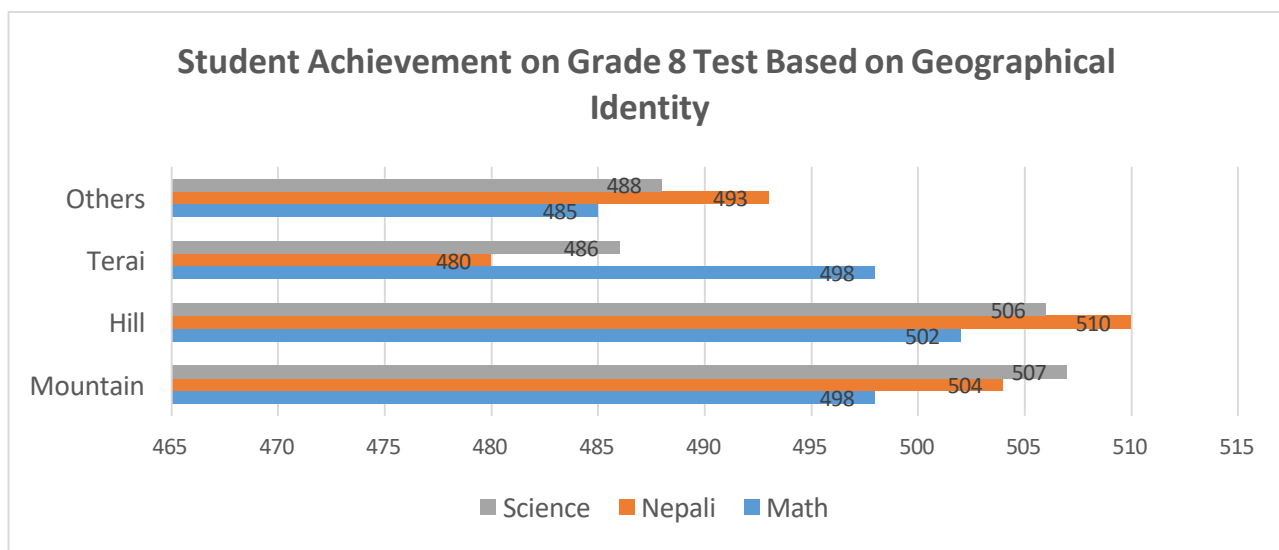
After state restructuring, all seven states have different students' learning outcomes, indicating a province-wide disparity in students' learning outcomes. Only in provinces 3 and 4 are the average learning outcomes of students above the national average, while the rest of the provinces have lower outcomes than the national average. There are significantly fewer students who are performing well. There is a disparity in science and math based on gender. Boys' learning outcomes are higher than those of girls in these two subjects. The figure below shows the learning outcomes of grade eight students in science, Nepali, and math, categorized by ethnic group. Most of the marginalized and vulnerable children are low performers in the group.[50]

Students Achievement on Grade 8 Test Based on Ethnic Group
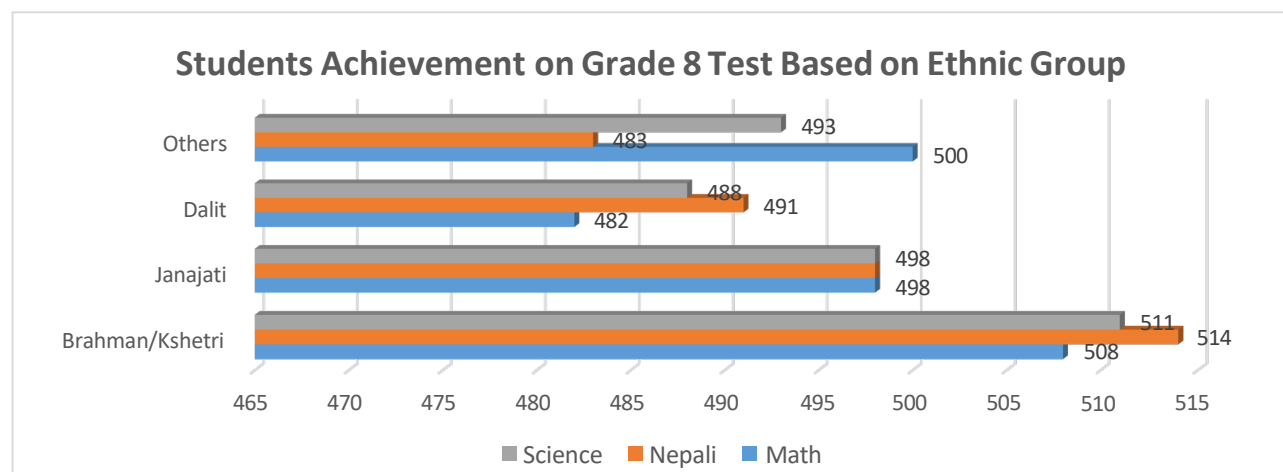
Source: NASA report on grade 8 test. Education Review Office, 2018

Likewise, children who speak Nepali at home tend to perform better compared to those who don't speak Nepali at home. Most Janajati children who speak their mother tongue at home face a challenge in increasing their learning outcomes. It has been observed that community school students have low learning achievement compared with institutional school students. The following figure illustrates the learning outcomes of students in grade eight, categorized by their geographical identities.

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[50] See National Assessment of Student Achievement 2017, Education Review Office, 2018

Student Achievement on Grade 8 Test Based on Geographical Identity

Geographical Identity	Science	Nepali	Math
Others	488	493	485
Terai	486	480	498
Hill	506	510	502
Mountain	507	504	498

Source: NASA report on grade 8 test. Education Review Office, 2018

Moreover, it has been found that there is a positive correlation between parents' education and students' learning outcomes. Almost all marginalized children's parents have a low level of education or are even illiterate, which is why the marginalized children also have a low performance level. The significance of adult literacy and parents' education is high, as it impacts children's learning outcomes. If the parents' profession is a teacher, office employee, or businessperson, the students' outcomes are better compared to those of students whose parents are laborers, farmers, or domestic workers. It has been seen that there is a positive correlation between economic status and children's learning outcomes.[51] Most of the marginalized children are from a lower economic background, which directly affects learning outcomes. Notably, some students from lower economic backgrounds are achieving average to better performance, but this is a relatively small number. Children working more than one hour at home tend to have lower performance compared to those who work one hour or less at home.

Students who continue in school, have a positive attitude towards school and teachers, and receive textbooks on time tend to have better learning outcomes. Students who face bullying in schools, whether from other students or teachers, tend to have lower academic achievement. Most of the marginalized students face such a thing; therefore, there is a chance of low performance among marginalized children. It has been observed that the students' performance in math and science decreased in 2017 compared to 2013. This suggests that learning achievement is not improved, but rather it decreases over time. Despite this academic achievement, we observed in the field that most marginalized children are confident, which has a positive impact on their personal and social lives. One of the students states: 'If I were not confident, I could not talk with you. I am confident and hopeful for my future.'[52] They learn some sort of skills and gain knowledge as well.

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[51] See National Assessment of Student Achievement 2017, Education Review Office, 2018
[52] Interview with student

Lessons and Recommendations

Despite putting efforts into improving access to quality education for marginalized children, SSDP has not yet realized equity in education. The gap between marginalized and mainstream children is clearly seen in terms of access, participation, and outcomes of school education. There are still 1481 primary (1-5), 1074 lower secondary (6-8), and 507 secondary (9-10) schools in which the government has not provided even a single teacher, and these schools are running on' private resources. There is still a lack of teachers for primary (1-5), lower secondary (6-8), and secondary (9-10) levels, respectively.[53] Some of the incentive schemes, like scholarships, are not enough and do not target the poor, and do not reach all children who need them. Effective programs, such as mid-day meals, have been cut off in many schools since the last fiscal year, which is adversely affecting the access to education for poor children. In remote areas, textbooks have still not arrived on time to start the educational year. Stationary, uniform, and indirect costs at school are also difficult for poor families to afford. There is still a lack of effective social mobilization, which would complement the efforts of other stakeholders in ensuring equity in education. The strong partnership between different local-level stakeholders is still lacking, which needs to be enhanced for better results in school education. Relatively, an inclusive culture is slowly growing, and less discriminatory practices among children with disability, dalits, and other disadvantaged groups are seen; however, such practices are still rampant across the nation. The school environment is becoming safer for girls and marginalized children, though there are some adverse cases also existing, which should be addressed by the school administration. Few local governments are gradually prioritizing education as a key sector for investment, and coordination with local governments has a positive impact on school performance; however, the majority of local governments still do not prioritize education. In case of marginalized children, if more than one marginalized identity is intersecting, the condition of the child becomes more vulnerable and likely to prevent access to quality education. The government and development partners also need to think about increasing early investment and intervention. This study offers several general recommendations and a few specific recommendations to the World Bank regarding access to and quality of education for marginalized children. A few general recommendations are:

- The periodic vulnerable community mapping is required at the time of project design, which makes any kind of educational intervention more precise and helps to ensure access and quality of education to vulnerable community children.
- Wider consultation is needed with vulnerable communities and their representative organizations, and should be shared through different media; such consultation and sharing are a fundamental part of such a huge program.
- More clarity is needed on the project document regarding local level capacity development, especially for local government and bureaucracy for education administration, school management committee, head teacher for leadership, and PTA members, which is one of the important features of the SSDP in the changing context.
- The routine educational expenditure should be reduced, and the budget should increase for innovation

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[53] See Teacher Redeployment Recommendation Task Force 2075

in education, improve soft systems at school, improve physical facilities, and quality human resources.

- It should focus more on equity and quality of education without losing attention on access to education of marginalized children at the time of design of the project.
- The incentive scheme should be based on a need-based approach. It is better to provide uniform, stationary, and mid-day meals to all needy children, at least up to the basic level of education.
- The idea of inclusive education should focus not only on disability but also on all excluded groups, like: dalit, religious minority, HIV infected, LGBTI, engendered and marginalized indigenous children, etc. The intersection of more than one marginalized identity should be prioritized for inclusion in the education system through multiple approaches.
- Children with disability should be given extra attention in school and the community. Disability-friendly schools, public and private infrastructure, and transportation systems should be developed. In every municipality, a residential school for children with disabilities should be established to ensure that all children with disabilities are included in the school system.
- Temporary migrant children need to be provided with different provisions of flexible schooling within the existing system, which ensures their continuity in the school system.
- Enough physical school infrastructure should be developed, which should be resilient and prevent any kind of natural disaster, for which more funding should be allocated.
- Qualified teaching and non-teaching staff should deploy immediately.
- Mother tongue education still needs to be promoted at least up to grade five. Parents should be oriented regarding mother tongue education. Multilingual teaching and learning practice should start.
- School is considered a zone of peace and should not be disturbed by any kind of political or non-political movement; however, sometimes schools and children's education are still disturbed. To maintain the school as a zone of peace, it is required to advocate effectively to all stakeholders.
- The educational budget should increase to meet the current challenges since many educational developments have not been carried out due to a lack of resources.
- The local governments should be empowered to take all the responsibilities of the school sector.
- A complete, child-friendly teaching and learning environment should be adopted. The CAS system should be strictly implemented, and teachers should receive more training on adopting CAS. Assessment of children with disability should be different from that of other children, considering their differences and limitations.
- To promote learning habits and ensure better learning outcomes, programs like the Early Grade Reading Program (EGRP) should be implemented across the nation.
- Educating and orienting parents is required on a periodic basis for creating a study-friendly home environment and other kinds of support in the children's educational

process.

- A school should provide all required institutional support for marginalized children to come to school and study properly. Schools should develop a mechanism for marginalized children that ensures equity in access, participation in learning, and learning outcomes.

A few specific recommendations for the World Bank are:

- SSDP should redesign based on the changing federal context, where local government is given the responsibility to run the school up to the secondary level.
- EMIS should improve to collect detailed data on vulnerable children and out-of-school children
- The institutional capacity building plan should be clearly articulated, in which SMC members, PTA members, and other teaching and non-teaching staff should have the opportunity to develop to their full capacity and contribute to the school
- To improve access, the amount of scholarship should increase based on need and target the poor. Midday meal, uniform, and stationery should be provided to all poor groups up to a basic level.
- Children should be provided with ample opportunities to study technical education at the secondary level, and poor children should be provided with full scholarships.
- Intensive and focused programs like flexible schools should launch with a target to out-of-school children
- The suitable curriculum, teaching, and assessment system should be designed for children with disability (who are non-physically disabled, such as the visually impaired, hearing impaired, and those with multiple disabilities, etc.)
- All teachers should be trained in the letter grading system, which has been adopted in recent years.
- The role of students and parents should be included in the monitoring mechanism of the teacher's time spent in the classroom.
- Need to work for redeployment and hire of quality teaching and non-teaching staff, who are currently lacking at the secondary level.

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Annex I-Field Photograph

Classroom with very few amenities and traditional teaching method

Students studying outside because it is very hot inside the class; no facility for a fan

Toilets used by all teachers, male and female students; no disabled friendly

Some children bring tiffin from home and share with others; no mid day meal provision

Children are playing, but their classrooms are temporary, with very few facilities

Classrooms are damaged and still not completely rebuilt; fewer facilities in the class

Out of School Girls attending non-formal (because their age is higher than the corresponding standard age in primary school) education with the aim of joining formal education

Because of a lack of enough classrooms, Children are taught on the balcony

Newly build schools are not disabled friendly in first and second floor

Children in early child development class with very less learning materials

Exceptionally, few schools have a computer lab, but it is underused or not used at all for student learning purposes

Few schools have a library but books and other Reading materials are very few and not properly used by students and teachers