



Lessons learned: COVID-19 education response for non-formal education in Sindh, Pakistan

Sindh Education Non-State Actors (SENSA) Programme

Executive summary

March 2021

Preface

This report delineates lessons learned during the COVID-19 response of the NFE segment of the SENSE programme implemented by HANDS and funded by UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The purpose of the report is to document and share experiences, lessons and challenges that the programme experienced in designing and implementing a distance learning intervention in the context of COVID-19 in the period March 2019 to February 2021.

The report gives an overview of how the programme responded to the COVID-19 situation and steps taken to design a rapid response through a distance learning intervention. Furthermore, the report details two main aspects of the distance learning experience: *Role and Experience of Teachers and Perspective of Parents*. In doing so, the report also touches upon key issues around challenges of implementation and measuring effectiveness of distance learning programming.

The findings and recommendations of the report are intended to inform educators, implementers, policy makers, researchers and donors while also contributing to knowledge generation around distance learning programming in emergencies in developing countries.

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Executive summary

The brief presents a review of the overall impact of COVID-19 on SENSE, shares how the NFE component of the SENSE programme responded during the pandemic, and outlines the key lessons learned for education programming in developing countries.

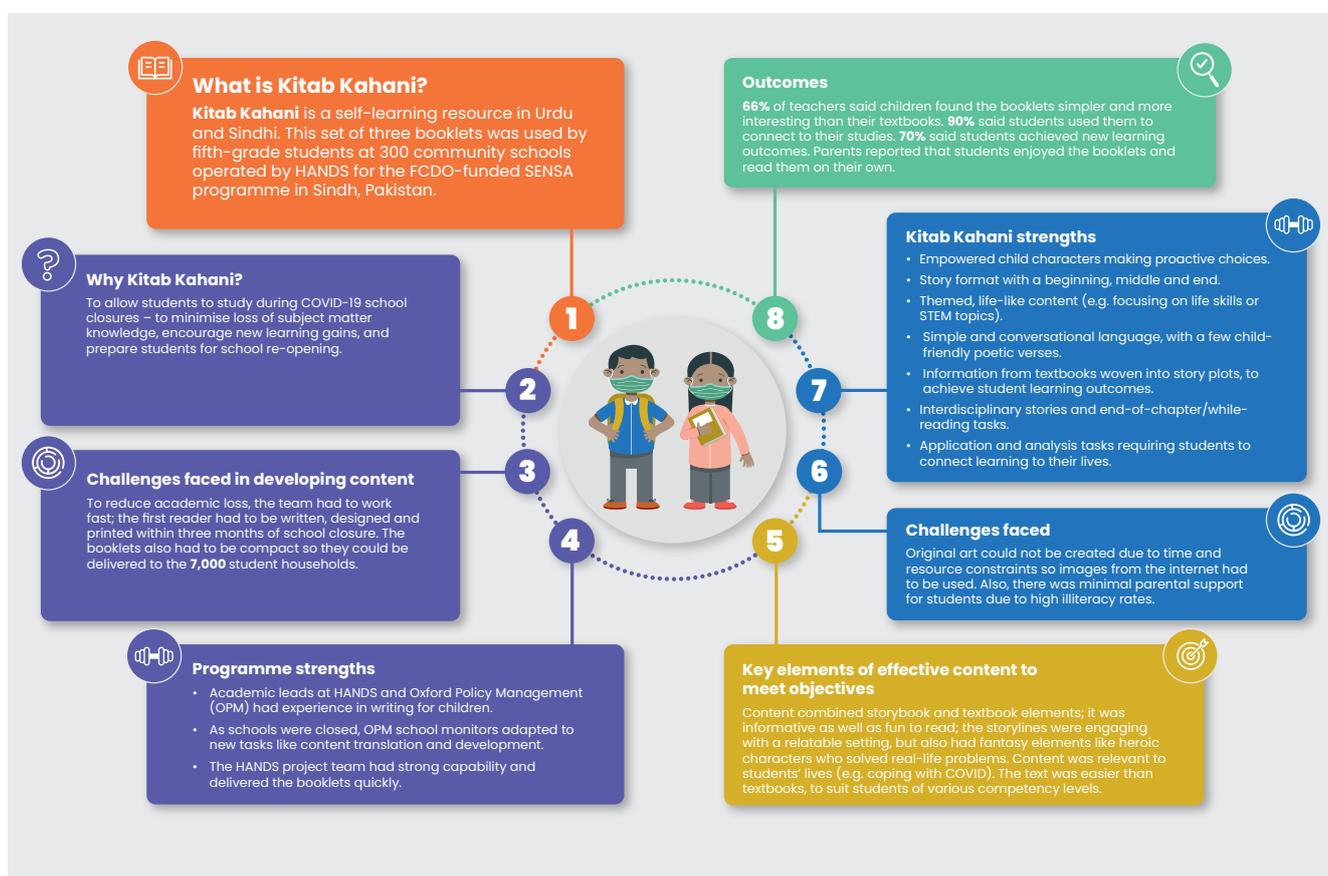
The largest component of the SENSE programme is a NFE model run by HANDS that focuses on community-based, non-formal schools for out-of-school children in Sindh. At the time of the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, HANDS was operating 300 schools in three regions of Sindh, with over 7,000 students. As the Technical Assistance and Management Organization, Oxford Policy Management (OPM) provides technical assistance, operations research, and third-party monitoring of SENSE. OPM played a focal role in supporting FCDO and NGO partners in designing a response to the COVID-19 situation in Sindh.

The SENSE NFE programme focused on three approaches to building an education response to COVID-19: adaptive programming, peer review and consultation, and building knowledge of teacher-student communities. Access to technology and communication determined the ability of teachers to train, and it also determined teacher-student interactions and how far students could engage in home-based learning.

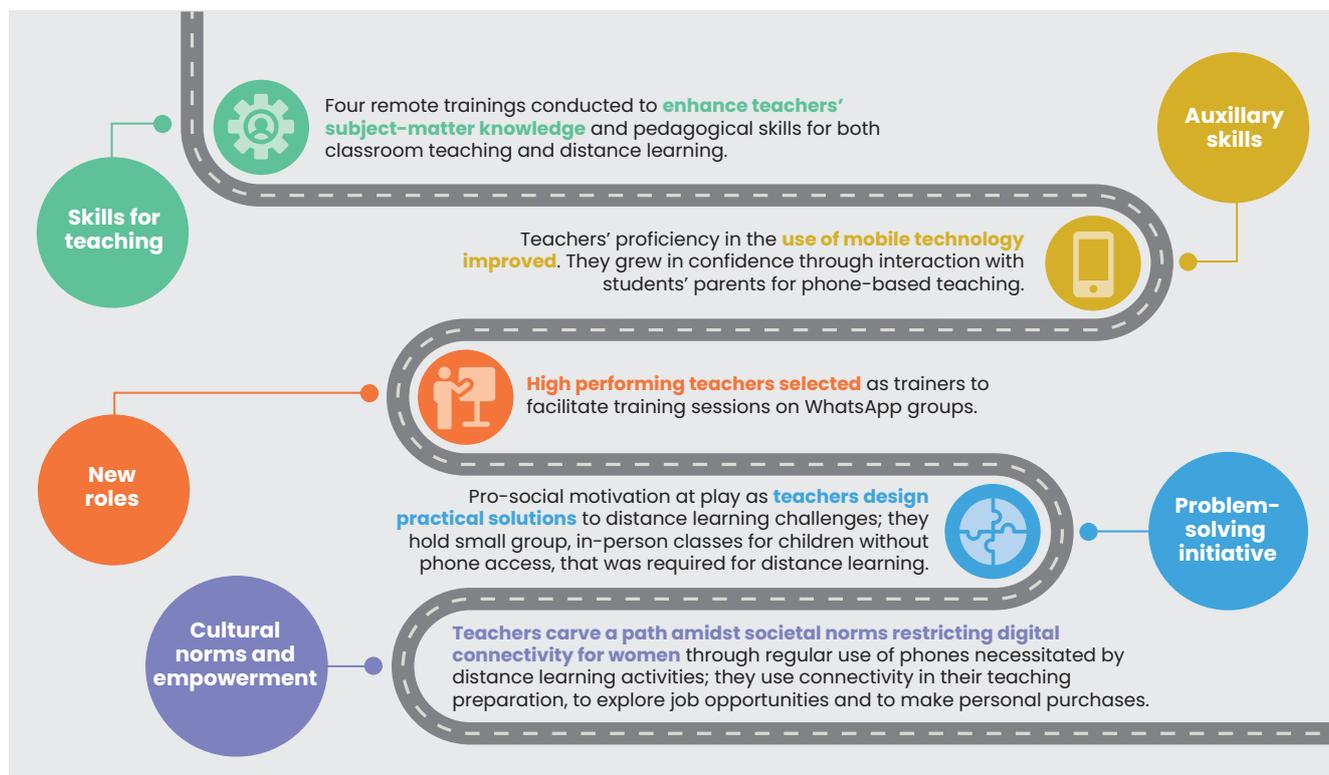
The Maktab Online distance learning initiative was an umbrella of activities designed to continue the core SENSE programme activities, including teacher training, student learning, and engagement with student households. The activities focused on keeping students and teachers engaged in learning activities and supporting student retention.

Distance Learning during COVID-19: Developing reading materials

Mapping the development and outcomes of SENSE Kitab Kahani supplementary readers



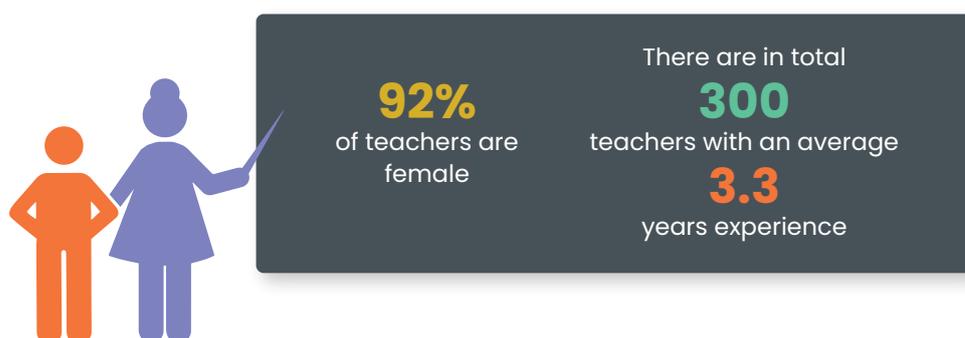
Teachers' professional journey through COVID times



Role and experience of teachers

SENSA teachers participated in online training as part of the Maktab Online. The findings indicate that teachers were able to enhance their content knowledge through PowerPoint presentations and trainers' videos for most topics, but there were some challenges in topics that required physical learning resources. Teachers demonstrated initiative in regard to participating in their own learning through documenting training content that they found useful. Classroom observations reported that while some teachers were incorporating new practices to their teaching, many were adhering to old practices and not engaging students in ways recommended by the pedagogical framework, which had been taught in the online trainings.

The Maktab Online trainings format had some benefits, as reported by project associates and teachers. Participants were able to attend sessions from the comfort of their homes, in contrast to training venues, which require them to remain seated and to observe a certain decorum. Multiple teachers and trainers reported increased participant responsiveness during remote trainings. Trainers were better able to monitor teachers' responses.





SENSA trainers were either project associates or academic coordinators having a relationship of seniority with training participants. The Maktab Online training format allowed senior project staff from HANDS and OPM to monitor the training and to mentor the trainers. Mentoring was done through private messages and phone calls. Trainers were checked by the observers in regard to being overly critical and were encouraged to provide appreciative feedback, in order to create an atmosphere of collegiality. Trainers were quick to adapt as their behavior was being observed in relation to this criterion, as well as in relation to their adherence to training content. This experience indicates that the success of observers' presence depends on how proactive and alert they are.

The success of Maktab Online depended on teachers' and field managers' access to smart phones, internet connectivity, and a steady supply of electricity. Ownership of smart phones did not automatically imply that participants had the required expertise to use required features.

Challenges of implementation

The COVID-related school closure brought several challenges. The SENSEA teams at OPM and HANDS had to respond creatively, strategically, and in a timely manner. Some of the challenges faced during the Maktab Online design and implementation phase are listed below.

1. The programme design had to be finalised within a short time, yet the implementing teams had to be flexible in the face of the evolving on-the-ground realities.
2. There was an initial lack of information on students' and teachers' access to technology. An ICT survey was conducted by OPM and HANDS to assess the ownership of and access to radio, television, mobile phones, and smart phones. The survey did not capture the full dynamics of technology use.
3. Reaching students through phone calls often proved difficult as the programme staff did not have parents' updated contact information. This was mainly because parents had multiple phone SIM cards or changed them frequently.
4. Telephone-based monitoring by OPM, follow-up calls by HANDS field staff, and teaching calls by the teachers created a problem for parents who had to deal with this influx of phone calls.
6. Maktab Online activities, including remote trainings, student content development, and parent outreach demanded a new set of skills. The programme implementing team had to build their skills in a limited timeframe.

Perspective of parents

The role of parents in distance learning is paramount. Parents' availability, cooperation, and decision-making determined the teachers' access to the child and the programme's ability to engage the child in distance learning. A total of 12 parents, including both mothers and fathers, were interviewed for the purpose of understanding how distance learning played out and was perceived at the household level.

Nearly all parents interviewed explained that the school closure resulted in a loss of routine and discipline in their child's daily life. The near ubiquitous concern about the loss of routine and discipline resulting from the school closure is indicative of parents' inability to establish a routine and discipline in their children's lives themselves. Moreover, perhaps the focus on schooling to discipline and manage time also indicates parents' perceptions of one of the key benefits of primary schooling in their young children's lives. Several parents expressed a deep concern about learning loss resulting from extended school closure. A few key lessons we can draw from the conversations with the parents are as follows:

- When schools are closed, distance learning initiatives should consider including schedules that help parents and students re-establish a routine in their lives.
- Programmes in low-income communities should extend support to parents to equip them with the tools and confidence required to establish a routine and discipline in their children's lives. This would not only be relevant during school closure, it would also help provide a more conducive learning environment at home.
- Schools should consider remaining open for a small number of students whose parents do not have access to any form of childcare due to both parents working.

Nearly all parents learnt about the distance learning through teachers. Most parents' initial reaction to hearing about the distance learning was positive. Our findings from the parental interviews suggest that teachers play a significant role in communicating and engaging with parents in these communities, because of both the social connection and their official positions. Key lessons that can be drawn from our findings on parental perspectives about the SENSE distance learning initiative are as follows:

- Our findings highlight the importance of having people in the household that champion and support the distance learning initiative, to help children overcome the barriers to distance learning. This role can be performed by both literate and illiterate parents.
- Parents with low literacy levels do not feel empowered to support their children in distance learning, beyond the basics. Therefore, parental literacy can impede the effectiveness of a distance learning programme.
- Students from low-income families have access to fewer technological solutions..

Conclusion

The SENSE Maktab Online distance learning offers important lessons for others working in education in emergencies, as well as regular, face-to-face teaching programmes in marginal, hard-to-reach communities. The low penetration of digital accessibility in almost all SENSE student households made this effort particularly challenging. Running the distance learning programme within these perimeters makes this model and its experiences particularly relevant for educators building programmes for out-of-school children in marginal communities.

Based on the findings from SENSEA Maktab Online, following are recommendations drawing on our experience of implementing a COVID-19 education response in community-based schools in Sindh:

1. Distance learning need not be dependent on hi-tech digital access. Interventions should be designed in alignment with the local on-the-ground realities.
2. Programme development and implementation should be flexible and responsive.
3. Cultural norms regarding access to and use of technology must be considered at the programme design stage to enable a smooth roll-out of the intervention.
4. Interactive and non-text-based solutions need to be devised in order to communicate with parents in low literacy communities.
5. The Kitab Kahani experience generated important lessons in regard to teaching-learning content development.
6. Basic information technology skills should be made a foundational topic in all pre-service and in-service teacher education.
7. Community-based schools benefit from employing teachers from within the same locality as the school.
8. Teacher capacity development measures should be designed according to the principles of andragogy.

Timeline of Kitab Kahani readers dissemination in Maktab Online

