

# LEARNING POVERTY: THE PROBLEM OF POOR WITHIN THE NON-POOR- A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

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*Abstract*—It has been widely accepted that education is a prerequisite for exercising human rights and Right to Education (RTE) ensures entitlement to this right. Although access to education may be ensured through increasing the enrollment ratios; ensuring learning, on the other hand, may involve much larger effort and direction than what is required for increasing the amount of schooling. Since illiteracy and poverty are positively related, eradication of poverty calls for making concerted efforts towards education not only in terms of quantity but also quality. Poverty results from deprivation and deprivation results in limiting the economic, social and political freedom of people. The concept of Learning Poverty showcases that the problem of poverty is far more deep and severe than what is exhibited by worldwide data on Income poverty. Whereas the policy makers all over the world have been obsessed with finding an effective measure of income poverty, the omission of learning poverty ratios while making estimates of poverty seriously understate the severity of the problem and thus create a blind spot wherein the impact of learning poverty on income poverty remain unattended. While the poor, who is also a learning poor, is included in headcount ratios, the learning poor who is theoretically non-poor remains missing while computing the poverty figures. This research paper analyzes the concepts of poverty and education in the context of human rights and tries to explore the missing link by delineating the dichotomous nature of poverty and then

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*proposes a conceptual approach to an all-inclusive Composite Poverty Index.*

**Keywords:** Learning Poverty, UN SDGs, Right to Education, Human Rights.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Poverty and illiteracy are like twins. A poor person does not have access to education and since he isn't educated, he is incapable of earning a decent living which drives him more into poverty. This further deprives him and his generations to come into poverty and the vicious circle continues. To break this nexus, the access to education becomes indispensable. Although, education now has been recognized as an international human right, millions of people still rake within the darkness of illiteracy. Although provision of 'schooling' has much to do with poverty alleviation, more important here is the 'learning' to be associated with schooling. Access to education may be ensured through increasing the enrollment ratios, reducing the drop outs and increasing the number of schools and teachers. However, ensuring learning, on the other hand, may involve much larger effort and direction than what is required for increasing the amount of schooling. Since illiteracy and poverty are positively related, eradication of poverty calls for making concerted efforts towards education not only in terms of quantity but also quality. The analysis of the two terms poverty and education becomes important before we seek to establish the relationship between the two.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Human rights and their relationship between poverty and education has been widely explored in economic as well as legal literature. Dhillon in his paper shows that those in poverty are deprived of their basic human rights and educational attainment makes them aware about these human rights and free them from its violation.<sup>1</sup> Speth argues that deprivation of choices and basic human rights in itself amounts to poverty and there should be a rights based approach to poverty.<sup>2</sup> Azevado in his paper has empirically shown how school closures due to COVID-19 have created wide repercussions on education and it may increase the learning poverty gap by 2.5 percentage points in most of

<sup>1</sup> P. Dhillon, "The Role of Education in the Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right", 43(3), Edu. Phil. and Th. (2011).

<sup>2</sup> James Gustave Speth, "Poverty: A Denial of Human Rights", 52(1), *Jor. of Int. Affairs* 52 (1), 277-92(1998).

poor countries.<sup>3</sup> Tilak argues that educational poverty is the primary reason for income poverty and hence education, not only at primary, but that secondary and higher education is essential for a person to enhance their capabilities and exercise their human rights.<sup>4</sup> Wrigley in his book chapter opines that creative skills such as ICT must be incorporated into the curriculum so that children may learn skills other than the ‘routine’, education involves whole person and its relationship with the world.<sup>5</sup> Davis argues that educated people tend to have more liberal views and thus increase in educational attainment tends to make society more liberal.<sup>6</sup> Overall there is numerous literature available to conceptualize and measure poverty; however most of the researches focus on viewing poverty with a multidimensional aspect. There may not be much uniformity in researches analyzing the effects of poverty on learning aspects of children and there is, therefore, greater need to focus research on analyzing this aspect of poverty and learning outcomes.

### III. OBJECTIVES

In the light of the above observations, the objectives of the present paper are:

- to establish the relationship between poverty and education in the context of human rights
- to explore the missing link by delineating the dichotomous nature of poverty
- propose the concept of an all-inclusive Composite Poverty Index

### IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a conceptual approach to propose the idea of Composite poverty index. The doctrinal analyses is used to analyze poverty and education in the context of human rights. The study is based on discursive secondary database analyses, sourcing the data from reports by national and international agencies both public and private, research papers, books, articles, journal papers and various online sources. The descriptive analyses of data is done to assess the multidimensional aspect of poverty and eventually to establish the link between learning poverty and income levels of nations across the world.

<sup>3</sup> João Pedro Azevedo, “Learning Poverty: Measures and Simulations. Policy Research” (World Bank Group, Working Paper No. WPS 9446, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Tilak JBG, “Post-Elementary Education, Poverty and Development in India” (Centre of African Studies, Working Paper Series 6, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Wrigley, T. (2012) “Rethinking Poverty and Social Class: The Teacher’s Response” in *Social Justice Re-examined: Dilemmas and Solutions for the Classroom Teacher* (Arshad, R., Wrigley, T. and Pratt, L. (eds., 2012).

<sup>6</sup> James A. Davis, “Conservative Weather in a Liberalizing Climate: Change in Selected NORC General Social Survey Items, 1972-78”, 58(4) *Social Forces*, 1129-56 (1980).

## V. POVERTY -A DEPRIVATION

Right to Life is a basic human right and perpetual poverty deprives this right since poverty, as accepted by nations world over, is a form of ‘deprivation’.<sup>7</sup> The basic definition of poverty describes it as deprivation of basic needs of survival as food and clothing, measured on the basis of income, consumption or expenditure levels per capita. This concept of poverty, therefore, may well be addressed as Income Poverty because poverty in itself is far broader and more pervasive than just the income levels. Poverty in a broader perspective, as proposed by Prof Amartya Sen,<sup>8</sup> is the deprivation of the choices available to the poor to enhance not only one’s mental, social and economic well-being but also deprivation of freedom to exercise one’s choice to have a reasonable level of living. The choices include a range of freedom such as political, economic, social, protective security and relationship with the government. This concept includes deprivation of basic facilities of health and education which are crucial to enhance one’s capabilities.

**Poverty: International Standards:** For measurement of Income Poverty, a welfare indicator is taken which is usually income or consumption of an individual /household. In developed countries income is used as basis to measure poverty whereas in less developed countries, consumption is considered more plausible criterion for poverty estimation. Other popular measures use calorie consumption per capita, food consumption as percentage of expenditure, nutritional status etc.<sup>9</sup>

The internationally accepted measures for estimation of poverty are the Headcount ratio, Poverty Gap and Squared Poverty Gap. These ratios measure the poverty percentages and the extent of the severity of poverty.

## VI. EDUCATION -A HUMAN RIGHT

Access to means of decent standard of living is a human right, and education is the means to achieve that human right. Whereas poverty is a form of deprivation, and all those who are not deprived of the basic standard of living may be considered as privileged, education is not a privilege. Education is a human right. Education provides empowerment to exercise one’s choice to lift themselves out of poverty and achieve the standards of decent living. Hence, education is a steppingstone towards right to life and right to dignity.

<sup>7</sup> World Bank Institute, Introduction to Poverty Analysis, Poverty Manual (2005).

<sup>8</sup> A.K. Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon (1981).

<sup>9</sup> Sen, *supra* note 8, at 14.

***Right to Education: International Legal Instruments:*** Since education is a prerequisite for exercising human rights, Right to Education (RTE) thus ensures entitlement to education. RTE was first recognized as a human right by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948.<sup>10</sup> Not only this, education as a human right is accepted and guaranteed in several other international treaties such as Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960, CADE), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966, ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979, CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, CRC).<sup>11</sup> This right is enshrined in at least 48 international and regional instruments by 2018.<sup>12</sup> Right to education is also incorporated in the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4<sup>13</sup> resolving to ensure inclusive and quality education for all by 2030. This commitment emphasizes the importance of education as a main driver in achieving the SDGs. UNESCO has the lead responsibility in ensuring implementation to right to education and it partners with following UN Human rights bodies for ensuring compliance and implementation of treaties, conventions and charters related to RTE.<sup>14</sup> These organizations are:

- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
- UN Human Rights Committees
- Universal Periodic Review
- UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education
- International Labor Organization

## **VII. INTERTWINING OF POVERTY & EDUCATION: LARGER THAN WHAT IS VISIBLE**

Although Right to Education incorporates both quality and quantity of educational opportunities for all, yet nations across the world and particularly the less developed and developing countries have been obsessed more with the idea of increasing the quantity of education rather than the quality. No doubt the enrollment ratios in the primary level have increased and have even reached

<sup>10</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations General Assembly Resolution (UNGA Res) 217A(III) 1948.

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO and Right to Education Initiative, *Right to Education Handbook*, 28 (2019).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO, Incheon Declaration and SDG4, Education 2030 Framework for Action, 20, (2015) <[http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en\\_2.pdf](http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf)>. (Accessed on 15 April 2022).

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO, “Why is it Important to have the Right to Education Formally Enshrined in Law and Other Instruments?” (8 April 2022, 8:00 PM) <<https://www.unesco.org/en/education/right-education/need-know>> (Accessed on 15 April 2022).

100%, yet the mechanisms to ensure the quality of education in these countries is not yet streamlined or defined clearly. The emphasis has, for long, been on ensuring provision of ‘schooling’ rather than ‘learning’. While schooling increases the number of children going to schools, learning ensures actual enhancement of opportunities, skill development and overall development of the productive capacities of an individual. Merely assigning the ‘time served’<sup>15</sup> in school or completion of a particular standard or grade is an inadequate mechanism to ensure provision of education as a right. The Right enshrines within it the acquisition of adequate skills, capabilities and competencies for getting a decent life and living.

Not having a basic facility such as education is one thing, but a larger problem than this is having a facility but not been able to make its best use of and hence remaining caught within the vicious circle. The internationally used definitions and measurements of poverty only talk about the poverty in context of ‘deprivation’; deprivation of basic minimum needs of survival, or for that matter at broader level deprivation of opportunities of health, education and other social needs. However, the pervasiveness of poverty extends well beyond this type of deprivation. Whereas the policy makers and researchers have been busy finding the causes and implications of poverty amongst the most deprived lots, the roots of poverty are well spread far beyond those considered as deprived in the theoretical definitions. Officially, the deprived class is considered as one which falls below the poverty line. However, due to certain inherent conditions, the disease finds its roots amongst the section of population who initially might not be falling under the criteria of the deprived but are pushed below it due to these factors. One such inherent condition is the problem of learning poverty.

## A. The Concept of Learning Poverty

Learning poverty<sup>16</sup> is a problem wherein despite having a learning opportunity, one is still unable to read and write proficiently within a specific age. Learning poverty is an inability to read and understand a simple text/ story by the age of ten. Drawing the data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), the World Bank in 2019 introduced the concept of Learning Poverty and depicted how the learning crisis enunciated by this learning poverty all over the world would seriously undermine the nations’ efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030. SDGs seek to end poverty and hunger, provide basic human rights of health, education and sanitation, ensure

<sup>15</sup> Kaffenberger et al., “Towards a Right to Learn: Concepts and Measurement of Global Education Poverty” (RISE, Working Paper Series. 21/085, 2021). <[https://riseprogramme.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Towards\\_Right\\_to\\_learn\\_Concepts\\_Measurement\\_Global\\_Education\\_Poverty.pdf](https://riseprogramme.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Towards_Right_to_learn_Concepts_Measurement_Global_Education_Poverty.pdf)>. (Accessed on 15 April 2022).

<sup>16</sup> *Learning Poverty*, World Bank (8 April 2022, 9:20 PM). <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/learning-poverty>>. (Accessed on 12 April 2022).

gender equality and empowerment, and maintain and sustain ecological environment.<sup>17</sup> The making of human capital is essential to accelerate the sustainable development efforts of the country and to bail out the countries across the world from the chronic problems of unemployment and poverty. However, the prevalence of learning poverty has seriously undermined the making of the human capital and this capital deficiency may overwhelmingly affect the overall SDGs. The pandemic situation across the world has forced schools to shut down world over and this has magnified the learning crisis as articulated by the learning poverty.

The efforts to internationally compare this learning problem is done on the basis of Minimum Proficiency Levels (MPL). The MPL is defined by Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAML) as the ability of a child to read a simple narrative text, draw inferences out of it, explain simple information through it and give personal opinions or judgments out of it.<sup>18</sup> On the basis of this MPL, an indicator has been developed to measure the learning poverty.

There will thus be two classes of children who would be considered as learning poor. One class would comprise of those, who, although are enrolled in a primary school, yet are assessed below the defined criteria of MPL. The other class would be those who belong to primary school age but are not enrolled in any primary school and thus would be below MPL. The learning poverty index is therefore a combination of schooling and learning at the end of primary education age. It, therefore, combines together the school deprived and the learning deprived. It is the weighted average of share of population below the minimum proficiency levels, adjusted by the out of school population. The index is therefore depicted as,

$$LP = [(BMP) \times (1-OOS)] + [1 \times (OOS)]$$

Where LP- Learning Poverty<sup>19</sup>

BMP- Share of children Below Minimum Proficiency level

OOS- Share of children which are out of primary school at the primary school age

Assessing the magnitude of learning poor on the basis of this index, 53 % of children are learning poor in low- and middle-income countries and in

<sup>17</sup> UNDP, "What are the Sustainable Development Goals?" (8 April 2022, 10:00 p.m.), <<https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>>. (Accessed on 15 April 2022).

<sup>18</sup> ACER GEM & GAML Report, "Minimum Proficiency Levels: Described, unpacked and illustrated", (2019).

<sup>19</sup> World Bank, *supra* note 16.

poor countries it is as high as 80%. With the school closures due to pandemic, around 180 countries had to close their schools at a stretch for several months. This has impacted the ongoing efforts for making up the learning deficit and with the present level of efforts towards this, around 43% of children will still be learning poor by 2030.

### **VIII. THE DICHOTOMY OF POVERTY- THE POOR WITHIN THE NON-POOR**

The learning poverty incorporates the learning deficit and school deficit; however, the income poverty does not include those learning poor children who may be above poverty line. The dichotomy of poverty is evident through the fact that wherein all emphasis is given to income poverty by considering those below the poverty line as the ‘poor’, and which might also include a part of the learning poor too, the remaining portion of learning poor children who may not be below income poverty levels are left out from poverty estimates. This is thus a class of poor within the non-poor class and the one which is usually left out from active poverty estimation. This class of population remains veiled behind a blind spot wherein although they don’t fall within the scope of any of the policy interventions for poverty alleviations, yet they swell the ranks of the income poverty in a span of time, consequently plummeting the poverty ratios. While the chronically poor households are deprived of the opportunities of good education and health because of income poverty, the learning poor might not necessarily come from the theoretically considered ‘poor’ households. These may be coming from households who may have income /expenditure levels well above the generally accepted criteria of poverty line and thus may be kept outside the ambit of ‘poor’ while designing the policies and programs for poverty alleviation. However, because of their inability to read and write properly despite having enough available educational opportunities before them, they may well fall below the gamut of poverty line in a span of some time. This section of population may not be considered ‘deprived’ in theoretical sense as the children remain enrolled in a school; however, this weakness creates inherent conditions such that they may be pushed to poverty levels for want of the ‘capabilities’ to enhance their income and thus the overall well-being. These are, therefore, the potential poor. This condition may well reflect the concept of aforementioned *capability poverty* as has been enunciated by Prof A.K. Sen who argued that capability enhances the well-being which further enables a person to function adequately in society and create conditions to enhance their social, physical and economic well-being. If these inherent conditions created by learning poverty are not taken to task by adequate interventions, it will multiply the numbers of those falling below poverty levels. This vicious circle would rather be more dangerous because they fall in the blind spot wherein no policy actively is designed to fix it. Studies have shown how foundational skills of children are important for them to efficiently take



up any professional endeavor and to further enhance their skills to scale up higher in professional arena. However, shaky learning skills at earlier level may weaken their educational foundation and may make them vulnerable to fall under the gamut of poverty. This vicious circle goes on and on and is the very reason why multiples of population are adding up to the poor population despite several attempts by the governments to reduce poverty. These are seriously frustrating every effort of the policy makers to understand and resolve this problem.

Although all types of foundational skills are important for all round development of the individual, reading skill is particularly vital because it is a prerequisite for grasping any kind of information or skill, since every learning makes use of written material at one or the other level. Effective reading proficiency is an indicator of sound development of other foundational skills of children and any compromise with the former may undermine the ability to excel in the latter.

If we analyze the aspects of income poverty worldwide, we can see that the roots of income poverty are spread off to the extent of deprivation prevalent in the countries. The analysis of learning poverty with that of other income poverty ratios depicts that the regions having high learning poverty have high income poverty ratios too. This is because the non-poor learning poor do swell the ranks of the income poverty at a later stage. Since the learning poverty includes both the income poor and the non-poor, these non-poor would at a later stage fall within the income poverty levels too for want of any active and effective remedial interventions specifically meant for them as they are within the range of the blind spot. Yet they would one day be filling the ranks of the poor. Drawing inferences from Table 1, which has been compiled from data taken from World Bank and UNDP, we have tried to compare the learning poverty ratios with that of income poverty and other developmental parameters in these regions. In the table, column 1 depicts learning poverty ratios whereas column 2 shows the Multidimensional Poverty index (MPI) ratios.

MPI incorporates various types of deprivations incident on a person such as health, education and decent standard of living.<sup>20</sup> It can be seen that regions with high learning poverty also have high MPI ratios. Sub Saharan Africa region where the learning poverty is highest also witnesses high MPI ratio. Europe & Central Asia have low ratios of both learning poverty and MPI.

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<sup>20</sup> Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, Global MPI, <<https://ophi.org.uk/>> (April 10, 2022, 7:30 p.m.) (Accessed on 15 April 2022).

Table 1

Regions	Contribution of deprivation in dimension to overall multidimensional poverty (MPI)(%)						
	(1) Leaning Poverty (%)	(2) MPI (%)	(3) Health	(4) Education	(5) Std of living	(6) Population living below national poverty line(%)	(7) Population living below \$1.90 per day(%)
Arab (Middle East & N Africa)	63.5	14.5	26.3	34.6	39.1	26.1	4.9
East Asia & Pacific	34.6	5.4	27.6	35.5	36.9	4.3	1.2
Europe & Central Asia	11.1	1	52.8	24.8	22.4	9.8	1.1
Latin America & Caribbean	50.8	6.9	36.3	26.3	37.4	36.9	4.2
South Asia	58.3	29	29	28.6	42.3	22.9	19.2
Sub-Sahara Africa	86.0	53.4	21.9	29.5	48.6	41.1	43.7

Source: Compiled from data by World Bank<sup>21</sup> and UNDP <sup>22</sup>

We can also compare the share of deprivations of various developmental parameters resulting in multi dimensional poverty ratios in these regions as shown in column 3, 4 and 5. It is interesting to see that the regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Arab nations, South Asia and East Asia & Pacific which have high learning poverty ratios in decreasing order, also have comparatively high share of deprivation of education, out of the given three deprivations, in the MPI ratio. This means that there is high attribution to deprivation of educational opportunities leading to multidimensional poverty ratio as compared to other deprivations such as health and standard of living in these regions. Lack of educational resources, scarce opportunities of learning and piteous conditions of education are responsible for a greater number of people falling within the poverty trap. This shows that prevalence of learning poverty is somewhere

<sup>21</sup> World Bank, “Country Learning Poverty Briefs”, (2021).

<sup>22</sup> UNDP HDR, “MPI Statistical Tables”, (2021).

an important factor to rising poverty levels in these regions. If we compare the percentage of people below national poverty lines in these regions and also those falling below international poverty line of \$1.90 per capita per day, then also we see the same trends prevailing. Ratios are high in regions having high learning poverty. This analysis corroborates the assertion of poverty within the poverty i.e. learning poverty being an important determining factor of income poverty. Although MPI does consider the deprivations other than income such as health, education and standard of living as an important variable in explaining the poverty ratios, but this too is only about those who are already income poor. It explains the share of these deprivations in overall poor but it does not include those who are non-poor but are still learning poor. Therefore, the composite indexes such as MPI also fail to cater to the problems of non-poor learning poor.

## IX. LEARNING POVERTY IN INDIA

Talking about learning poverty, 56% people were estimated to be learning poor in India. It is 2.3% point lower than the average of South Asian countries and 4.3 % points lower than average for low-income countries. Comparing it with the situation in 2019, there was one percent increase in the ratio from the 2019 estimate This shows the worsening of the learning poverty situation as it was 3.5 % and 0.3 % better for average of South Asian counties and low-income countries respectively in 2019.<sup>23</sup> One of the reasons for it can be the adverse impact of the pandemic as most of the schools were shut due to countrywide lockdown and had to resort to online classes spread over several months. Even after the schools were re-opened, there were reports of many of the children not returning to school due to several reasons. No doubt this had a hurting effect on the already grim educational scenario in the country.

The data pertaining to learning poverty in the country reflects the hard fact that the development planners have always been obsessed with the idea of increasing the enrollment ratio focusing at primary level, inadvertently presuming that the schooling will automatically translate to learning. This is one another area where income poverty seems to correlate with learning poverty as with income poverty too the planners, throughout the seventy years of planning, had wrongly presumed that growth of income would automatically trickle down to the lower levels and how increasing national income would automatically take care of the problem of deepening poverty in the country. The programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan have been trumpeting the high primary enrollment ratios, where almost 90% of villages now have a primary school within the sphere on one kilometer and 95% of children have access to schools been enrolled in the primary grade.<sup>24</sup> However, in a bid to increase

<sup>23</sup> World Bank, *supra* note 21, at India.

<sup>24</sup> Pratham Organisation, Annual Status of Education Report, Pratham Resource Center: Mumbai, (2005).

numbers, we have been left far behind in improving the actual reading and learning skills. Quantity has seriously undermined the quality, and this is the reason that in spite of proclaimed success on increasing outlays on education and multiplying numbers of school going children, half of the Grade 5 students could still not read a Grade 2 level text. 44 % of children in the age group 7-12 years, already enrolled in schools, could not read a basic paragraph.<sup>25</sup>

A comparison of the learning poverty ratios of India and other neighboring countries has been shown in Table 1. A perusal of the table shows that learning poverty ratios are high for countries with low income and low for countries with high income. Amongst the neighboring countries given, China and Sri Lanka belonging to upper middle-income groups, have lower poverty ratios. On the other hand, India and other neighboring countries belonging to lower income groups, have significantly high poverty ratios. This indicates the intertwined income and learning poverty relationship.

**Table-2**

<b>Countries</b>	<b>Learning Poverty (%)</b>	<b>GER at primary level(%)</b>	<b>Primary School Dropout (%)</b>	<b>Expected Years of Schooling</b>	<b>Mean years of schooling</b>	<b>Income group</b>
India	54.8	113	8.8	12.2	6.5	Lower Middle Income
China	18.2	100	n.a.	14	8.1	Upper Middle Income
Pakistan	74.5	94	29.6	8.3	5.2	Lower Middle Income
Sri Lanka	14.8	100	1.6	14.1	10.6	Upper Middle Income
Afghanistan	93.4	104	n.a.	10.2	3.9	Low Income
Bangladesh	58.1	116	33.8	11.6	6.2	Low Income

Source: Country Learning Poverty Briefs, World Bank, 2021

Table 2 depicts some of the educational indicators of India and the neighboring countries. While there are high Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) at primary level, however these high GERs could not add to the quality of learning in these countries. As can be seen, the learning poverty ratios in these countries are still high in spite of the high GERs. A GER of 113% in India depicts the inclusion of over aged pupils or repeaters who do not belong to the specified primary age group. Barring Sri Lanka and China, most of the other countries depict high poverty ratios coupled with more than 100% GERs.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Incidentally, Sri Lanka and China which have 100% GERs are also the ones which have low poverty ratios compared to their other counterparts. One explanation to the grim learning poverty ratios witnessed in these countries may be because of the high dropout ratios, hindering the quality and quantity of learning amongst the pupils, and subsequently swelling ranks of out of school children. This too is reflected in the mean years of schooling and expected years of schooling in these countries as depicted in the table. The two components are combined together to develop a country's educational index, one of the components of Human Development Index (HDI).<sup>26</sup> Educational index of a country depicts the educational scenario prevalent in that country. Expected years of schooling depicts the number of years a child of school entrance age is expected to spend at school, or university, including years spent on repetition assuming that prevailing patterns of age-specific enrollment rates would remain the same throughout the child's life.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the mean years of schooling depicts the average number of completed years of education of a country's population aged 25 years and older, excluding the years spent repeating the same grades.<sup>28</sup> In the table, whereas the expected years of schooling is high in most of these countries, the means years of schooling is almost half of it or even less than half. It shows that although the expected years of schooling levels correlate well, to a certain extent, with the high primary enrolment ratios in these countries, the higher dropout ratios and lower GERs at secondary and tertiary levels push the mean years of schooling at effectively lower levels. For China and Sri Lanka, where poverty ratios are less, this component is comparatively higher as compared to the other countries having high poverty ratios. The high learning poverty ratios is one of the reasons culminating into a high poverty ratio. Thus, the learning poor at one time, join the ranks of income poor at subsequent time. Weak foundational skills of children limit the capabilities of children to become competent enough to carry forward their education leading to higher drop outs and lesser enrollments in the higher levels of education. These incompetencies take away the so-called freedom of these children which would have enabled them to make a choice to enhance their own well-being. This '*capability deficiency*' thus leads to '*income deficiency*'. It would be important to mention here that countries do have their robust systems of educational data collection and that they do design efficient educational policies to remove illiteracy and related deficits, however, there is an absence of a holistic approach to the poverty problem incorporating the educational deficit, rather than considering it as a mere by product of poverty alleviation programs. Learning poverty does lead to income poverty, and since this is so, estimation and policy designs for tackling income poverty should also actively incorporate estimation as well interventions to eradicate learning poverty within those programs too.

<sup>26</sup> Human Development Reports, UNDP, (April 10, 2022, 9:30 p.m.), <<https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>>. (Accessed on 15 April 2022).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

## X. MEASURING THE DUALITY OF POVERTY- NEED FOR A COMPOSITE INDEX

Because of the bipartite nature of poverty, there is a need for policy makers to devise indexes to capture this dichotomy of poverty. The indexes such as headcount ratio, PG and SPG only measure the extent of income poverty. However, this estimate doesn't reflect the true extent of poverty as it fails to encompass the poor within the non-poor. For this purpose, there is a need to find a composite index of Learning poverty and Income poverty. A composite poverty index would comprise of head counts below poverty line plus the head counts of learning poor above the poverty line. This is because all those who are income poor as well as learning poor would already be included under income poor. However, those learning poor who are not income poor still need to be identified and be included in the measurement. Composite poverty, thus, would incorporate overall income poverty plus the learning poverty above income poverty lines.

**Composite Poverty<sub>T</sub> = Income Poverty<sub>T</sub> + Learning poor above poverty line<sub>T</sub>**

T refers to the current year

Diagram 1 gives a pictorial view of the concept of composite poverty.

**Diagram 1- Composite Poverty**



Source: Developed by the author

The intersection point in the diagram shows the learning poor below poverty line which are already covered under income poverty.

While the policy makers have been regularly ignoring those learning poor which are above poverty line in the current year, it is a serious mistake as the poverty alleviation policies to be designed must not only be focused on income

poverty but also consider the learning poverty which has serious consequences on nation's resources.

While the income poverty also measures the severity of poverty through poverty gap and squared poverty gap, there is also a need to measure the same severity among the learning deficient too. The learning poverty index does not measure how much deficient is the child's learning score from the minimum proficiency levels. This data is important to know what the intensity of remedial interventions should be so as to improve a child's score. Hence, there is a need to devise indexes for learning poverty gap on the lines of income poverty gap. The composite of severity of income poverty and the severity of learning poverty would then adequately define the intensity of the problem of overall poverty in the country.

## **XI. RIGHT TO EDUCATION AS ENSHRINED IN INDIAN CONSTITUTION**

Indian constitution envisages education as a right as per the Right to Education Act passed by Parliament and enacted on August 4, 2009.<sup>29</sup> The Act came into force in April 2010 provisioning free and compulsory education to children aged 6-14 years of age under Article 21A of the Indian Constitution. The Act requires all private schools to reserve 25% of seats for to children as per their economic status as well as caste-based reservations. The Act specifies the duties of Centre, State and local governments and also sharing of financial responsibilities between them. The Act in detail specifies the adoption of teacher-pupil ratio, prohibition of mental and physical harassment of students, screening procedures in admission, capitation fee, non-acceptance of unrecognized schools etc. Although the Act calls for all round development of the child, it fails to mention specifically about the mechanisms to ensure the quality and standards of educations which actually would amount to enhancing the capabilities in children. This lacunae in the act is the reason why despite high enrollment ratios that we have achieved, still unemployment and poverty ratios have failed to decline throughout the planning period.

## **XII. ENSURING RIGHT TO QUALITY EDUCATION**

The World Bank has proposed policy packages to revamp the literacy and educational programs and has suggested to the nations across the world to gear up their educational programs to lessen the prevailing levels of learning poverty. In this regard the world bank has proposed the following packages:

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<sup>29</sup> Right to Education, (April 11, 2022, 6:00 p.m.), <<https://www.righttoeducation.in/>>. (Accessed on 15 April 2022).

- A literacy policy packages comprising of remedies to promote reading proficiency
- Strengthening the educational system through refreshed approach
- A robust system of measurement and data collection.

While numerous interventions maybe adopted at various levels of school education, technological interventions may best be utilized to initiate remedial interventions related to reading and writing skills. Digital texts readers, vocal reading apps, software applications, computer-aided learning and reading platforms, open digital education platforms and virtual coaching platforms for children are the several technology-enabled methods which must be used to facilitate the reading skills in children. Leap learning method, a plug and play learning for children, uses technology and has proved to be effective in this direction for children who do not have access to schools. Hands on games, use of apps and flipped classrooms are some of the features of this technique and these learning labs can be taken in two suitcases and be set up any where. Camara Education<sup>30</sup> is one such social organization which provides these technological prerequisites such as computers and skilled teachers to schools in Africa. Organizations such as these have found technologically driven learning as an approach to resolve the problem of learning poverty by providing low-income students with the technological resources necessary to escape it. In the very same lines in India, *Ekstep* is a learning effort towards making available an open digital infrastructure wherein children can freely access the learning materials; the portal also offers educational content for teachers and educators too, who can access rich contents such as teaching materials, interactive videos, story-based lessons, practice exercises, assessment systems etc.

### XIII. CONCLUSION

Despite the scenario prevailing about learning poverty, saying that increased enrollment ratios have not made any changes in the learning environment would be misleading. The world has witnessed positive changes across nations by opening the gates of school for every child and thus has come a long way in ensuring the ‘right to school’. However, the next step in this direction would be to ensure quality education to students so that they may be equipped with requisite skills and capabilities to ensure decent living standards for them in the time to come. The transition should thus be from right to school to ‘right to learn’ because it is only then that we would be realizing the true spirit of Right to Education.<sup>31</sup> This requires not only scaling up the outlays on health and education but also ensuring that every unit of money spent is utilized in

<sup>30</sup> Cleo Hudson, “Computers can Reduce Learning Poverty in LMICS”, The Borjen Project Blog (March 21, 2022, 9:20 p.m.), <<https://borgenproject.org/computers-can-reduce-learning-poverty/>>. (Accessed on 15 April 2022).

<sup>31</sup> Kaffenberger, *supra* note 15, at 11.



developing the capabilities of children so that they have freedom and choice to exercise their rights effectively. Any leakages at the implementation efforts may seriously undermine the overall developmental efforts of the country and may consequently frustrate the goals of *Inclusive growth*.