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LOCKDOWNS AND PARTNERSHIPS DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Executive Summary

The digital divide, the gap between those who do not have access to the internet and ICTs and those who do, was furthered during the COVID lockdowns in the United States and Thailand. In the United States, many students were forced to do their schoolwork on a phone or public WIFI or not do their school work. Students of lower-income families were at an even more significant disadvantage (around 10%-15% more) when not having quality access to ICTs. In Thailand, lack of access was mainly centered around the lack of computers. Thailand has one of the lowest rates of computer ownership but excels in internet access, which they are one of the best in the world. Lower-income families were also more affected in Thailand, similar to the United States. Both nations took great strides to bridge the divide during the lockdowns, specifically with the help of PPPs (public-private partnerships). In Chicago, Illinois, USA, Chicago Connected brought access to thousands of families, allowing for more opportunities for students to continue their education. In Thailand, the educational website thailandlearning.org was founded and brought many resources and tools to Thai students for free. While significant first steps were made, more can and should be done to bridge the divide in both countries further and enhance their specific programs.

Digitally divided = Educationally divided

Digital divide is a policy issue that has become more present within the digital age. As humans become more "plugged-in" to the digital world, the inequalities and division of digital literacy become more apparent. According to an article from the Stanford Computer Science Department, the "digital divide" refers to the growing gap between the

underprivileged members of society, especially the poor, rural, elderly, and handicapped portion of the population who do not have access to computers or the internet; and the wealthy, middle-class, and young Americans living in urban and suburban areas who have access. This includes the lack of devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers, the lack of internet access, and the lack of digital literacy (Stanford, n.d).

The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted people's lives in many ways, from how they work, how they entertain themselves, and especially how children are educated at the kindergarten to Grade 12 levels. These students' education plans had moved solely online for most of the 2020 school year to slow the spread of the virus (Ong, 2020). This move required students to access ICT (information and communication technology) and good broadband internet to access class materials and education tools, which was an issue for some. While the digital divide existed before the pandemic, the strictly enforced stay-at-home orders only exacerbated the inequality in access to ICTs. The lack of a computer or internet now meant missing critical pieces of a student's growth (Ong, 2020). According to a Pew Research survey in 2020, around one-in-five respondents said that their students would not be able to complete their homework due to a lack of a computer at home (21%) or they would have to finish their homework on public WIFI due to lousy connection speeds or a simple lack of access to the internet at home (22%) (Vogels et al.). In addition, around three-in-ten (29%) respondents said that their students would have to complete their homework on a cellphone (Vogels et al.). The digital divide during the lockdowns hit lower-income families incredibly hard as well. According to the same survey, 43% of lower-income families said that their students would have to do school on their cellphones, 40% said that they would have to use public WIFI due to the lack of access at home, and 36% said that they would not be able to complete homework at home due to the lack of a computer (Vogels et al.). The United States' education system suffered from a lack of access to the internet and lack of proper ICT, such as computers or laptops.

The situation in Thailand has more to do with the lack of access to computers than high-speed internet. In Thailand, only 21% of households have access to a computer, significantly lower than the global average of 39% and even lower than the developing country average of 38% (Rattanakhamfu, 2020). Thailand is ahead of the world in terms of internet accessibility, where 67% of the population the households have access, compared to the global average of 55% and developing country average of 44% (Rattanakhamfu, 2020). Unfortunately, as internet access rises, households with computer access are lower (International Telecommunication Union, 2021). Similar to the United States, lower-income families carry the majority of the burden in the digital divide. According to the National Statistic Office of Thailand, in 2017, only 3% of households who made under 200,000 baht a year had access to a computer, and

only 19% of households earning over 200,000 baht a year had access (Rattanakhamfu, 2020). According to the Office of Higher Education Commission, in 2017, one-quarter of the 1.9 million diploma-earning graduates did not have access to a computer (Rattanakhamfu, 2020). They may have had easy access to computers at universities or internet cafes, however, the closing of campuses and enforcement of public safety ordinances took away these options for lower-class individuals. Based on survey results of 15-year-old students, nearly four out of ten students were without access to a laptop or computer. However, internet-capable cell phones (98%) and internet access at home (85%) were much higher and closer to the global average (International Telecommunication Union, 2021). The start of the pandemic heavily affected students in 2020, as a National Statistical Office survey in 2020 found that "nearly half of families in Thailand were not ready for online learning; 51 percent did not have access to devices for online learning; 26 percent did not have internet access for online learning; and 40 percent of parents and caregivers said they did not have time to oversee their children's online learning" (UNICEF, 2022). In 2020, the Kenan Foundation Asia reiterated that the COVID lockdowns affected many students outside of Bangkok in terms of their education due to their lack of computers and ICTs and the unpreparedness of teachers to jump into online learning (Kenan Foundation Asia, 2020).

Securing the future

The City of Chicago, Illinois, is the third-largest city in the United States and is home to the Chicago Public School System. The Chicago Public School System (CPS) has around 330,000 students enrolled in the 2021-22 school year (Chicago Public Schools, n.d.-b). Approximately 636 schools within the system, including district-run, charter, contract, and SAFE schools (Chicago Public Schools, n.d.-b). When COVID-19 pandemic entered the United States in early 2020 and lockdowns started in March of the same year, hundreds of thousands of students were affected and were forced to continue their education at home. The City of Chicago partnered with private corporations Comcast and the RCN corporation to provide high-speed internet to Chicago families in need (Chicago Public Schools, n.d.-a). According to United States Census data and the Chicago Connected site, over 100,000 students lacked quality internet access pre-COVID-19. Since the launch of Chicago Connected in June of 2020, over 40,000 families have enrolled. In addition, the program has extended its outreach to nearly 228,000 students, allowing students and families to connect to the internet all across the city (Chicago Public Schools, n.d.-a). Surveys of the program have also been conducted by Kids First Chicago and allowed for the program to improve on speed and availability where respondents said issues arose.

Thailand's methods to solve the dividing issue were similar to the United States. Early in the lockdowns, the Thai government took a rigid approach to stop the

virus, especially within schools and educational institutions, implementing online learning programs. The Royal Thai government-aided its students and future leaders by setting up seventeen TV stations to aid students up to 18 years of age (Burapachaisri, 2020). Of the seventeen channels, fifteen are basic education programming, one is centered around distance learning, and one is focused on vocational learning (Tortermvasana, 2020). Another method this government of Thailand used to bridge the digital divide in their country was to partner with the non-profit Asia Foundation and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Australian Embassy to create a website that compiles helpful online learning tools and tools to aid student as they continued their education from home during the lockdowns (Lao, 2020).

The website, www.thailand_learning.org, is available in Thai and English on tablets, phones, and desktops, granting access to many applications such as Kahoot and Microsoft Teams (Lao, 2020). Within the website, there are three tabs: online learning, online field trip, and online tools. Online learning has numerous links to sites that help educate on various fields, from math and chemistry to art history and even language learning. The online field trip includes links to museums, zoos, and other educational institutions worldwide that have taken to the internet to continue teaching people everywhere. Online tools include links to various devices such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Miro, and Notion making it more convenient for students and parents to use these apps (Asia Foundation & Australian Embassy, 2020).

How to continue progress

The Chicago Connected program has worked very well for Chicagoans in need of quality internet access, and improvements are being made regularly based on feedback from participants. This policy brief suggests that the program and the City of Chicago:

- Continue with the yearly surveys, improvements, and investments

This will allow for the program to continue to work with internal and external stakeholders leading to improvements going forward.

- Continue to invest in PPPs to further enhance ICT access throughout the city This will further build the bridge that aids in closing the divide.
- Adopt the UN's 2016 Resolution making internet access a human right

This will force the citiesCity and other organizational bodies to keep internet access in mind when starting new projects, helping bridge and prevent further division.

- Take note of thailandlearning.org and create a central hub for education tools and resources, accessible to all Chicagoans.

This will give great resources to everyone online, promoting education and learning for all.

The Asia Foundation and Australian Embassy's collaboration to make thailandlearning.org and the Thai government's efforts to continue education via television were reasonable first steps to bridge the digital divide during the lockdowns. This policy report suggests that these programs:

- Conduct surveys with users to determine the effectiveness and quality of the site This will help in enhancing the site and show where further investments should be made.
- Make findings public to increase transparency

This will build trust among the citizens and users, enhancing legitimacy for the site and programs.

- Enhance internal and external stakeholder communication, looking toward Chicago Connected as an example.

This will further boost the reputation and effectiveness of the site as communication is key between all parties for a successful site and program.

These recommendations should not be the end of improvement for these programs but simply starting points of inspiration. The program leaders should continue to learn from other similar programs and countries to enhance their own further and continue to build towards a fully digital world.

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