Session 2, Track 2 | Paper Session: Digital Divide / Infrastructure

Time: Friday, 25th Sept. 2026
2:00pm - 4:00pm

Chair: Prateeksha Tiwari, University of Vienna

Whose Futures? Which Futures?: State Narratives of EdTech and the Unequal Making of Desirable Educational Futures in Rural China and India

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Abstract

This paper examines inequity in education through the future-making politics of educational technology (EdTech) in rural China and India. In both countries, state narratives present EdTech as a means of overcoming rural disadvantage, modernising schooling, and preparing children for national futures of development, innovation, and competitiveness. Digital education is thus framed not merely as a pedagogic support, but as a route through which rural students can be aligned with desirable collective futures. However, far from being equitable— these futures privilege particular ideas of progress, value, and personhood, while rendering other educational purposes less visible.

Drawing on my comparative qualitative research in rural primary schools in China and India, this paper asks how these state-promoted futures are reinterpreted in local settings and what this reveals about inequity. It argues that inequity should not be understood only in terms of differential access to devices, platforms, or connectivity. It also lies in the unequal power to define what education is for, what counts as a desirable future, and which social and cultural values are allowed to shape digital schooling. The China–India comparison enables the paper to trace how institutional conditions and cultural-historical formations shape the interpretation of EdTech and the kinds of futures it is made to serve.

The paper shows, first, that official EdTech narratives in both contexts attach rural schooling to wider projects of national modernisation, casting technology as a vehicle of transformation and future-readiness. Second, in rural practice, these purposes are reworked through local understandings of a good childhood, moral education, discipline, and collective aspirations of prosperity and progress. Teachers, school leaders, and families do not simply receive and enact state visions, but selectively reinterpret them in light of local aspirations and obligations. Third, this interaction produces uneven educational futures—some ways of being educated are validated as modern and forward-looking, while others remain marginal, residual, or in need of translation into

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Direct and Spillover Effects of Electrification on Child Work and Education in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Achieving universal access to electricity is a core objective of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 7) (UN, 2025) as electrification is widely recognised as a key driver for economic development (IRENA, 2024). A growing body of literature provides evidence linking improved electricity access to increased adult labor supply and shifts toward more productive employment (Dinkelman, 2011; Lipscombe et al., 2013; van de Walle et al., 2017; Grogan, 2018; Fried and Lagakos, 2021). However, the effect on children remains largely unexplored. Particularly, the direction of the effect is theoretically ambiguous as income gains from electrification could reduce the need for child work but electrification could also create new employment opportunities for children. This complexity is compounded by uneven access within electrified communities, where children may be differently affected based to their household's access status. Yet, this is often overlooked in policy discussions.

Child work is generally seen as a hindrance for education (Heady, 2003; Beegle et al., 2009; Haile and Haile, 2011). However, increases in child work are not always an undesirable outcome. In some cases, it may help households to increase the income or share household responsibilities without necessarily leading to negative effects on outcomes such as children's education (Maconachie and Hilson, 2016, Mussa et al., 2019). For a nuanced evaluation of the effect of electrification on children, it is therefore important to examine how electrification induced changes in child work influence children's education.

Accordingly, more empirical evidence on the intended and unintended consequences of electrification is needed to inform policies that ensure electricity expansion under SDG 7 supports, rather than undermines, progress toward eliminating child labor (SDG 8 Target 7) and ensuring education for all (SDG 4). Using four waves of Ethiopian panel data and differentiating between households with and without own electricity access within electrified communities, we address this gap. We find that community electrification reduces children's domestic work time on average, but impacts vary by household access. In electrified communities, children from households without electricity increase unpaid work on household-owned farms and enterprises. In contrast, children from households with electricity reduce total work time across household enterprises, farms, and domestic chores. Mediation analysis shows that electrification-induced reductions in work time enable children with household access to increase education time, whereas those without access do not benefit similarly. These findings underscore the importance of integrating child welfare considerations into infrastructure planning.