

## Laying a groundwork for the rebound

### Education during COVID-19 and beyond

1 December 2020



The crisis is exacerbating pre-existing education disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children, youth, and adults – those living in poor or rural areas, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities and forcibly displaced persons – to continue their learning. Learning losses also threaten to extend beyond this generation and erase decades of progress, not least in support of girls and young women’s educational access and retention. Some 23.8 million additional children and youth (from pre-primary to tertiary) may drop out or not have access to school next year due to the pandemic’s economic impact alone.

Similarly, the education disruption has had, and will continue to have, substantial effects beyond education. Closures of educational institutions hamper the provision of essential services to children and communities, including access to nutritious food, affect the ability of many parents to work, and increase risks of violence against women and girls.

As fiscal pressures increase, and development assistance comes under strain, the financing of education could also face major challenges, exacerbating massive pre-COVID-19 education funding gaps. For low income countries and lower-middle-income countries, for instance, that gap had reached a staggering \$148 billion annually and it could now increase by up to one-third.

Before the pandemic, the world was already facing formidable challenges in fulfilling the promise of education as a basic human right. Despite the near universal enrolment at early grades in most countries, an extraordinary number of children – more than 250 million – were out of school, and nearly 800 million adults were illiterate.

Then, COVID-19 has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 per cent of the world’s student population, up to 99 per cent in low and lower-middle income countries.

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On the other hand, this crisis has stimulated innovation within the education sector. We have seen innovative approaches in support of education and training continuity: from radio and television to take-home packages. Distance learning solutions were developed thanks to quick responses by governments and partners all over the world supporting education continuity, including the Global Education Coalition convened by UNESCO. We have also been reminded of the essential role of teachers and that governments and other key partners have an ongoing duty of care to education personnel.

But these changes have also highlighted that the promising future of learning, and the accelerated changes in modes of delivering quality education, cannot be separated from the imperative of leaving no one behind. This is true for children and youth affected by a lack of resources or enabling environment to access learning. It is true for the teaching profession and their need for better training in new methods of education delivery, as well as support. Last but not least, this is true for the education community at large, including local communities, upon whom education continuity depends during crisis and who are key to building back better.

The COVID-19 crisis and the unparalleled education disruption is far from over. As many as 100 countries have yet to announce a date for schools to reopen and across the world, governments, unions, parents and children are grappling with when and how to approach the next phase. Countries have started planning to reopen schools nationwide, either based on grade level and by prioritizing exam classes, or through localized openings in regions with fewer cases of the virus.

### **Policy recommendations**

Preventing the learning crisis from becoming a generational catastrophe needs to be a top priority for world leaders and the entire education community. This is the best way, not just to protect the rights of millions of learners, but to drive economic progress, sustainable development and lasting peace.

To date, a Global Education Coalition comprised of United Nations agencies, international organizations, private sector entities and civil society representatives, mobilized by UNESCO, have been engaging actively to support national COVID-19 education responses. [1] A new campaign, entitled Save our Future, will help to expand global support for action on education at this time. [2] In this regard, decision-makers are encouraged to pursue the following recommendations and actions.

#### *Suppress transmission of the virus and plan thoroughly for schools reopening*

The single most significant step that countries can take to hasten the reopening of schools and education

institutions is to suppress transmission of the virus to control national or local outbreaks. Once they have done so, to deal with complex challenge of reopening, they should be guided by the parameters set out below and should conduct a thorough consultative preparatory process.

- Ensure the safety of all: The UN and the education community have developed guidance to help countries through the timing, conditions, and processes for reopening education institutions. [3] A key condition to reopening is being able to ensure a safe return to physical premises, while maintaining physical distancing and implementing public health measures, such as the use of masks and frequent handwashing. Such conditions may be more difficult in contexts with overcrowded classes and areas without basic infrastructure and services and will require additional investment.
- Plan for inclusive reopening: The needs of the most marginalized children should be included in reopening strategies and adequate health measures need to be provided for students with special needs. Conducting assessments to estimate learning gaps and prepare remedial or accelerated learning programmes is essential at the time of reopening.
- Listen to the voices of all concerned: Given the role that parents, caretakers, and teachers have played since the onset of the crisis, an essential part of the decision-making process is consultation and joint planning for reopening with communities and education stakeholders. A lack of clearly communicated and predictable planning can lead to a loss of teachers to other forms of employment, and to more children entering the labour market, decreasing the chances that they will return to learning.
- Coordinate with key actors, including the health community: Measures to mitigate the risks of transmitting COVID-19 will be likely be needed in the medium term, so it will be important to reflect on the impact of various reopening strategies, by using whatever information is available and by learning from other countries. Working with health officials in planning reopening is recommended, particularly as scientific evidence continues to evolve. Coordination with other social policies to protect and promote inclusion of families that suffer under the crisis is equally important.

#### *Protect education financing and coordinate for impact*

The pandemic has pushed the world into the deepest global recession in living memory. [4] This will have lasting effects on economies and public finances. The consequences have been particularly severe for low and lower-middle income countries. National authorities need to act to mitigate long-term consequences for children, despite constraints on public spending, with education interventions forming part of national COVID-19 stimulus packages alongside health, social

protection and economy recovery initiatives. There are several mutually reinforcing entry points to get there:

- Strengthen domestic resource mobilization, preserve share for education as top priority and tackle inefficiencies: As widening the tax base in countries with a large informal sector takes time, other measures (fighting tax avoidance and evasion, revising tax incentives and treaties, etc.) need to be explored without delay. [5] Ongoing reforms and innovations tackling inefficiencies [6] should be prioritized.
- Strengthen international coordination to address the debt crisis: G20 countries have already agreed to a “debt service standstill” for least developed countries until the end of 2020. [7] While this will allow some short-term financial leeway, it does not address the needs of all vulnerable countries, nor does it address the longer-term issue of debt sustainability.
- Protect official development assistance (ODA) for education: Given the scale of the global education emergency, donors need to ensure that aid commitments to education are, at the very least, kept stable, if not increased, and focus on the most at risk, including children in emergency situations.

#### *Strengthen the resilience of education systems for equitable and sustainable development*

- An undeniable human right, education is the bedrock of just, equal, and inclusive societies and a key driver of sustainable development. Strengthening the resilience of education systems enables countries to respond to the immediate challenges of safely reopening schools and positions them to better cope with future crises.
- Focus on equity and inclusion: Measures to “build back resilient” and reach all learners need to understand and address the needs of marginalized groups and ensure they receive quality and full-term education. Learners in emergencies and protracted crises should be prioritized so that their education is not further jeopardized. School health and nutrition programmes (including school meals, water and sanitation) are of great importance to vulnerable children, as well as a powerful incentive, increasing school reenrolment and attendance (especially of girls and children living in extreme poverty or food insecurity). [8]
- Reinforce capacities for risk management, at all levels of the system: Capacities are needed at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels to withstand emergencies. This includes capacity to develop and implement contingency plans, such as alternative education pathways, to mitigate impacts.

- Ensure strong leadership and coordination: The multitude of actors needed to respond to and mitigate the impact of crises can lead to duplication, inefficiency, and confusion, in the absence of strong leadership and coordination. Strong coordination mechanisms are also needed to maximize the inputs of all stakeholders, building on complementarities, including local civil society, to serve the most marginalized.
- Enhance consultation and communication mechanisms: Education directors, teachers, parents and caregivers – all played a critical role in the response to the COVID-19 crisis and took on additional responsibilities in uncharted territories. Engaging these stakeholders can enhance the education system’s resilience.

#### *Reimagine education and accelerate positive change in teaching and learning*

In the face of global closures of educational institutions and the halting of non-formal training, there has been remarkable innovation in responses to support learning and teaching. But responses have also highlighted major divides, beginning with the digital one. Learning losses due to prolonged school closures mean that many educational outcomes are at risk. For a number of reasons, we cannot return to the world as it was before. [9] As we “build back resilient”, we need to ensure that education systems are more flexible, equitable, and inclusive.

- Focus on addressing learning losses and preventing dropouts, particularly of marginalized groups: At the same time that educational authorities build on the positive – and take heed from the negative – lessons from the crisis revolve around three priorities: (i) catching up on learning losses, (ii) bringing back to school learners at risk of dropping out, and (iii) focusing on social and emotional welfare of the student population, teachers and staff.
- Offer skills for employability programmes: Measures to address these priorities should also fully take into account the necessity of equipping youth and adults with the skills in demand in the labour market. This may require rethinking how these key skills are identified, for both current and future labour markets. Among the many things the crisis has underlined is that the “essential workers who hold the system together” [10] need to be supported and reinforced.
- Support the teaching profession and teachers’ readiness: It is essential that teachers and communities be better prepared and supported if equitable and inclusive learning, in and beyond classrooms, is to be guaranteed. Technology alone cannot guarantee good learning outcomes.
- Expand the definition of the right to education to include connectivity entitlement: Considerable

attention has been given to the use of technology to ensure learning continuity. Those digital solutions to improve teaching and learning which are institutionalized in the aftermath of the pandemic need to put equity and inclusion at their centre, to ensure all children may benefit from them.

- Remove barriers to connectivity: The crisis brought a deeper understanding of the digital divide and related equity gaps, which require urgent attention. [11] At the same time, strongly relying on technology will not on its own bring effective learning for all children, especially the most marginalized. It will be necessary to ensure that as children have better access to the internet, stronger parental support and greater availability of learning materials will enable maximum benefit more from any digital solutions. [12]
- Strengthen data and monitoring of learning: Managing the education crisis requires a continuous monitoring of data at the student, teacher, and school levels. This monitoring will need to be based on a mix of existing data and assessment systems and potentially new approaches tailored to this specific context.
- Strengthen the articulation and flexibility across levels and types of education and training: An important element of resilient education systems is their flexibility, which relies on strong articulation between levels and types of education, but also the capacity to mobilize alternative modes of delivery.

## Conclusion

The shock of the COVID-19 crisis on education has been unprecedented. It has set the clock back on the attainment of international education goals, and disproportionately affected the poorer and most vulnerable. And yet, the education community has proved resilient, laying a groundwork for the rebound.

There remains a risk of a downward spiral, in a negative feedback loop of learning loss and exclusion. Yet every negative spiral of aggravating socio-economic circumstances suggests its reverse image of a positive spiral, one which would lead to the future of education we want: one of inclusive change in education delivery, of unleashing the potential of individuals, and of collective fulfilment, in all areas of life, through education investment.

There is unlimited drive, and untapped resources, we can count on for the restoration, not only of education's essential services, but of its fundamental aspirations. It is the responsibility of governments and the international community to stay true to principles and conduct reforms, so that, not only will the children and youth regain their promised future, but all education stakeholders find their role in making it happen.

[1] For more information see <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/education-response/global-coalition>.

[2] For more information see [www.SaveOurFuture.world](http://www.SaveOurFuture.world).

[3] UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP, World Bank, "Framework for reopening schools", 2020, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373348> and "Reopening schools: How to get education back on track after COVID-19", 2020, available at <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/reopening-schools-how-get-education-back-track-after-covid-19-13424>. See also Global Education Cluster, "Safe back to school: a practitioner's guide", 2020, available at <https://educationcluster.app.box.com/v/Safeback2schoolGuide>.

[4] Global growth is estimated at -4.9 per cent in 2020. International Monetary Fund (IMF), "World Economic Outlook Update, June 2020: A Crisis Like No Other, An Uncertain Recovery", available at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020>.

[5] Education Commission, "Background Paper: The Learning Generation: Domestic Tax and Education", available at <https://report.educationcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Domestic-Tax-and-Education.pdf>.

[6] This includes addressing concerns such as high repetition rates, waste in procurement, ensuring better distribution and allocation of teachers, making sure teachers are paid transparently and on time. Tackling inefficiencies also requires improving monitoring and financial planning to better track (with real time data rather than the prevailing lags in education spending information) how resources are spent.

[7] Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), "A 'debt standstill' for the poorest countries: How much is at stake?", 27 May 2020, available at <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/a-debt-standstill-for-the-poorest-countries-how-much-is-at-stake-462eabd8/#endnoteaoz2>.

[8] GEM Report, "Policy Paper 41", available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373844/PDF/373844eng.pdf.multi>.

[9] Karen Mundy and Kerrie Proulx, Making evaluation work for the achievement of SDG 4 Target 5: Equality and inclusion in education, UNESCO, NORAD, World Bank Group, UNICEF, 2019, available at [https://www.gcedclearinghouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/190340eng\\_o.pdf](https://www.gcedclearinghouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/190340eng_o.pdf).

[10] UNESCO, International Commission on the Futures of Education, "Education in a post COVID-19 world: Nine ideas for action", 2020, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373717/PDF/373717eng.pdf.multi>.

[11] UN, "Policy Brief: The World of Work and COVID-19", available at [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/the\\_world\\_of\\_work\\_and\\_covid-19.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/the_world_of_work_and_covid-19.pdf).

[12] World Bank, The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy responses, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2020.