Inclusive School Reopening: Supporting the Most Marginalized Children to go to School

Most governments around the world have temporarily closed schools and other educational institutions in an attempt to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of May 12, these nationwide closures in 162 countries are impacting an estimated 1.216 billion children representing over 69% of the world's student population. Several other countries have also implemented localized closures impacting millions of additional learners.

The closure of schools has resulted in the use of innovative ways to deliver remote learning through a wide range of approaches including online learning, television, radio, mobile as well as provision of printed material to those in low connectivity areas. However, it is clear that only learners from households with greater levels of connectivity, higher levels of parental education and engagement, and availability of books and materials, have better chances to access and benefit from such remote learning approaches.[1]

On the other hand, children from the poorest households risk being left out and unlikely to benefit, a situation that will lead to widening inequalities. Similarly, other marginalized children, girls (especially adolescent girls at risk of being married off or becoming pregnant early), children with disabilities, children affected by conflict and displacement, refugee, IDP and migrant children, children from ethnic and linguistic minorities, boys and girls engaged in child labour, children in Urban slums, are at risk of disengaging from learning considering the limitations of remote learning approaches. Similarly, pre-COVID out-of-school children are at higher risk of permanently being left out. For most of these children, the deprivations are multi-dimensional and overlap putting them at even greater risk.

Although the impact of current school closures on education is not fully comprehended, previous experiences of school closure during Ebola provide evidence of widening inequalities which disproportionately affected disadvantaged children. School closures during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa threatened decades of progress in education: loss of learning, increased dropouts, and upticks in child labour, violence against children, teen pregnancies, and early marriages are among the negative effects seen. The unprecedented levels of current COVID-19 school closures could derail progress in achieving the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. Even prior to COVID-19, education was already facing significant challenges and several children were missing out on education. In 2018, according to UIS data, there were about 258 million children and youth out of school including 59 million children of primary school age, 61 million of lower secondary school age and 138 million of upper secondary age. The Out-of-School Children Initiative (OOSCI) Evaluation Report in 2018 showed that children's economic background (i.e. family wealth, participation to livelihood earnings) was cited by 92 percent of the respondents as a barrier. Personal or physical characteristics of children (e.g. gender, age, disability, etc.) was cited by 75 percent, and school accessibility due to distance by 68% of the respondents. These challenges could be exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is therefore imperative that particular attention is focused on mitigating such risks during current school closure and more importantly as governments plan the reopening of schools.

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[1] A UNICEF blog series investigates the impact of Covid-19 on education – exploring the need for multiple remote learning platforms to meet the needs of all students, good practices for equitable remote learning (based on UNICEF's research brief for promising practices for equitable remote learning in 127 countries) and the potential parental role for continued learning.

Recently UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank and the World Food Programme (WFP) released an [interagency framework for reopening schools](#) to provide guidance on safe schools reopening as governments are increasingly looking at options to reopen schools. For marginalized children, the framework recognizes that school reopening will mean going beyond opening the school gates for teachers and learners. For this group of learners, four key factors will be worth considering:

1. Policy reforms including operational guidelines to ensure inclusion of previously excluded children and address marginalization
2. Getting all children to return/go to school or connected to other learning platforms
3. Making up for learning loss
4. Ensuring their safety and well-being

As UNICEF country offices engage with their respective governments in plans to reopen schools, it is important to plan accordingly while recognizing the complexity of getting all marginalized children back to school and keeping them in school. The proposals below can be considered in planning for better school reopening so that the needs for the most marginalized children to get back to school and stay in school are met.

1. Getting all children to return/go to school or other learning platforms

Getting all marginalized children to school or due to phased school reopenings connected to learning platforms to avoid learning shortfalls will require targeted support and interventions. Key factors to take into consideration will be the economic impact of COVID-19 on the poorest households and the cost of going to school, targeted community engagement and messaging on school reopening as well as on the measures put in place such as safety, protection, water and sanitation hygiene, health, nutrition, psychosocial support to ensure the most marginalized children to return to/enrol in school.

Incentivize by removing financial barriers: Low income families face an additional threat as the ongoing pandemic is expected to lead to severe economic impacts. When faced with economic challenges, parents and caregivers may resort to engaging children and young people in income generating activities and young people may migrate to urban areas in search of income leading to their dropout from school. For girls, this could lead to child marriages and increased risks of [teenage pregnancies as was the case during Ebola in Sierra Leone.](#) Reducing the burden of cost on households to send their children back to school is one the most effective ways to ensure the most marginalized children return to school.

When schools reopened in Sierra Leone following Ebola, government waived school fees and examination fees for two years to incentivize parents and caregivers to send children back to school. The government, with support of development partners, also provided learning materials to all learners, including assistive devices for children with disabilities, to attract learners to return to school. Other social protection strategies such as cash transfers, school block grants targeting girls and boys, those at risk of becoming child labourers and the most deprived children can also reduce the risk of drop out. Focus must also be in ensuring that private schools, including low fee schools and other types of private education providers such as religious schools, are regulated and monitored to avoid unregulated fee increments that place burdens on households.

Targeted back to school campaigns: Communication is key to building trust among stakeholders, partners and local communities. It is therefore important to ensure effective communication channels exist, at the

national level, within the school community, between the government education authorities, communities and schools. Communication must put greater emphasis on why returning/enroling is important and on the measures put in place to ensure safety of learners.

Community engagement and awareness-raising should be prioritized in back-to-school strategies to ensure higher return rates and the enrolment of pre-COVID out-of-school children. In the context of COVID-19, communication around improved school hygiene facilities and practices will be effective in encouraging parents and caregivers to send their children back to school upon reopening. For education facilities that have been used as isolation facilities or temporary hospitals, community messaging must emphasise the action taken to ensure that such facilities are safe for children to return to. At the same time, it is important to ensure that any health safety measures put in place by schools do not create additional barriers for children to come to school. For example, the school can provide masks and not ask parents/caregivers to cover such costs.

Communication strategies should be context specific depending on the school reopening process adopted. In countries where phased reopening is implemented to reduce the risk of transmission, it is important that children hardest to reach with remote learning strategies are prioritised in the return to schools. In such contexts, communication messages must be tailored accordingly. In contexts where schools remain closed or will be closed again due to cyclic process of transmission and potential outbreak etc., remote learning must be expanded to reach all learners with relevant high to low and no technology strategies to reduce the risk of increased inequality, ensuring accessibility of learning platforms and materials by children with disabilities. For some countries, a blended learning approach may be adopted further highlighting the need for effective and equitable remote-learning offerings to avoid learning shortfalls to reach all children. These different approaches must be integrated in community engagement strategies and messages.

Back to school campaign messages should also include strategies that have been put in place to ensure that children with disabilities, children of linguistic and ethnic minorities, poorest children including the urban poor, children in conflict affected contexts come to/return to school. In Sierra Leone, a massive community mobilisation and back to school campaign plan packaged messages for various target groups on safety from transmission risk and plans in place to support learners return to school. It is important to ensure that critical communications and outreach is made available in relevant languages, accessible formats and should be tailored to populations of concern including children with disabilities.

Adjust enrolment requirements: Revise admissions and re-admissions requirements to ensure non-discrimination, align and eliminate barriers and reduce requirements to entry into school. This is particularly true for children on the move, children who are from indigenous communities, and other groups of children who may not have the required documentation to re-/enroll in school. Reducing requirements for enrolment could also benefit children who were out of school pre-COVID-19 to get the opportunity to enroll in school, such as children with disabilities who may have been prohibited from enrollment due to discriminatory policies.

Track and follow up children at risk of dropping out: It is important to put up mechanisms to monitor attendance of learners when schools reopen. Such mechanisms can be school/community led to follow up on children who are regularly absent from school as this could be a sign of high risk of drop out and identify and address the reasons for absence. Similarly, schools and communities can follow up on learners who do not come back once schools open and this will allow for quick action to ensure these children do not completely leave school. Such mechanisms should also identify and track children who

were out of school pre-COVID-19 and to support them to enroll in school or attend other alternative non-formal learning pathways such as Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALP). A multisectoral approach, working collaboratively with child protection service providers, engaging civil society including women's organizations and organizations of persons with disabilities, community-based organizations, must be adopted to ensure extensive reach.

Encourage girls to re-/enroll: Communications campaigns must be in place to encourage girls to return to/enroll in school. Plans must include addressing barriers that discriminate against girls, including bans on re-entry for pregnant girls and young mothers. UNICEF in coordination with Brookings Institution propose [these five actions to reopen better schools for girls](#). Building partnerships with other actors such as non-governmental organizations providing support for girls' education, including women's and girl's movements, could lead to a concerted effort to get as many girls to return to school. In some contexts, there are more boys out of school and/or at higher risk of not returning to school because they are engaged in economic activity and for other reason, specific strategies and targeted messaging must be developed to get them into school.

2. Make up for learning loss

Following school closure, most learners will need significant support to catch up on academics when they return to school. This will be especially critical in school systems that struggled to roll out effective remote learning to reach all children. However, learners who lacked connectivity, learning devices, parental support or those with linguistic challenges and with disabilities will likely need the most help. In many cases, there will be children and young people who were already lagging behind even pre-COVID-19. Identifying the unique needs of various groups of leaners or individual will be important in determining where extra attention and program is needed. Formative assessment can be conducted upon return to schools to identify the learning gaps/loss in order to tailor strategies to address them.

Address critical learning gaps: Evidence shows that school closures lead to loss of learning including significant losses in reading and mathematics. Marginalised children who did not effectively participate in remote learning programmes may be disproportionately affected. Addressing their learning gaps must be a priority in when schools reopen. Priority must be on helping these children to develop their foundational skills also as a strategy to mitigate against drop out. Solutions to address learning loss must be tailored to the different needs of children. For Instance, solutions specific to students with disabilities will be very different and standard approaches may not be a realistic goal for all. It is important to ensure universal design of learning to meet needs of diverse groups of children. For example, differentiated and individualized support, access to assistive technology and learning support, and reasonable accommodations may be required for children with disabilities.

Catch up strategies to cover learning loss: To mitigate inequalities that might have been created or exacerbated during school closures for the most marginalized groups, programmes such as supplementary teaching, tutoring, catch up classes, and extra-curricular nonformal learning activities could be adopted. Accelerated learning programmes could also be put in place depending on how long learners have been out of school. Plans must also be in place for learners who may experience delay in returning to school to help them catch up. It is important to also plan how to support the needs of teachers for them to be able to assess and understand the learning needs of each and every learner, adjust accordingly and to deliver such programmes.

Adjusted academic calendars, curriculum, and examinations: Getting back to business as usual with the school calendar, curriculum and administration of examinations, could negatively impact those who were struggling pre-COVID-19 and whose situation may have been exacerbated by the closure of schools. As such, options to adopt a simplified curriculum targeting areas where learning loss will be most

consequential, such as reading and mathematics, could help the most disadvantaged learners to catch up and not be left behind. Similarly, automatic promotions could help to ensure that disadvantaged children are not left behind and to avoid risk of overage learners in classrooms as well as minimise dropouts which could likely for disadvantaged children who do not make the examination or fail to pass.

3. Ensuring safety and well-being

Re-engagement with school after a significant absence requires a time for readjustment for many students, this period can be particularly challenging for the most vulnerable children. Learners will need time to adjust. It is likely that some children and teachers will have experienced trauma due to loss of family members, having been sick themselves, and some may have experienced an increase in violence, abuse and neglect. School reopening must include cross-sectoral planning for the prevention of and response to violence, abuse and neglect of children to ensure access to appropriate essential services and support and to help both teachers and learners to adjust.

Support children to adjust: It may be necessary to promote multitiered systems of support that go beyond education and include social, emotional, psychological and mental health support. Teachers need to keep close contact with learners and parents to determine which students may require additional intervention and/or counseling support. School administrators should also create a mechanism for referral to ensure learners receive the appropriate support. In addition, schools could consider embedding social and emotional well-being into their regular classroom teaching at least the first weeks following school reopening to help children make the adjustment. Teachers must be equipped with the necessary skills and training to provide this kind of support to learners.

Address safety from violence: Aftermaths of COVID-19 could include heightened risks of stigma, discrimination and violence including bullying. The most marginalized children could be at risk and more exposed to violence. MoE should support schools setting-up plans in advance to address discrimination and stigma and to prevent violence and bullying in schools.

Health and nutrition: Plans must be in place to ensure the safety of learners on the way to, and from school to minimize the risk of new infections. Similarly, there is need to adhere to government health safety protocols including hand washing and general hygiene. Explicit attention should be given to accommodations required, based on specific needs, for children experiencing functional barriers to be included in the face of special measures being adopted; e.g. social distancing, hand washing and respiratory hygiene, transportation, etc. In addition, there is need to put short to long term plans to ensure availability of accessible and inclusive water, hygiene and sanitation services that are segregated by gender and cater for the needs of all learners including those with disabilities. Menstrual Health Management (MHM) facilities must also be in place to increase attendance of adolescent girls and their well-being. Similarly, expansion of school feeding programmes to reach previously excluded children is a potential lever to promote inclusion of the most marginalized. However, it is important to ensure school feeding programmes are accessible and inclusive of the most marginalized children.

4. Policy reforms to address marginalization

The post COVID-19 recovery period presents an opportunity to make education systems more equitable and inclusive. Assessing the effects of school closure on the most marginalized is one of the critical ways

to recovery and to making education inclusive for all. Getting the required disaggregated data on the impact of COVID-19 on education, including learning outcomes of the most marginalized learners including children with disabilities will be a first step to develop evidence-based recovery plans. Targeted strategies to reach them should be costed, adequately financed and sustained over time.

Expand inclusive remote learning strategies: Recovery plans must include strategies for developing resilient systems that can withstand any re-surgency of the pandemic or other future crises including ensuring that in the event of any similar school closures, remote learning will work equitably for all learners. Plans must include addressing the digital divide for the poorest and for girls and children with disabilities as well as adopting blended approaches for delivering education by scaling up remote learning strategies that work for the most marginalized learners. This should also include 1) building the capacity of teachers to provide support in relation to remote learning including for children with disabilities, 2) ensuring access to technology and 3) outreach to/communication with parents to support to parents to facilitate learning at home. It will also be important to consider measures for sustainability of parent-driven learning at home for contexts where school closures may be recurring. E.g. using time in school to prepare children for self-directed learning where possible, etc.

Expand access to marginalized groups: Adapt policies and practices to expand access to children missing out on education. Steps taken to ensure continuity of learning for millions of learners during COVID-19 school closures and to get them back into school must be broadened taking into consideration children who were missing out on education prior to the crisis such as pre-COVID-19 OOSC and children in crises and conflict. Strategies must include investing in non-formal, alternative, equivalency programmes including at secondary level, that meet the needs of children who may not be able to access formal schooling.

Adopt gender transformative education systems: Post COVID-19 recovery plans must include analysing and understanding the gender gaps in the education systems and adopting implementation of gender responsive policies. Consideration should include systemic barriers to making education gender responsive as well addressing gender-based violence, early and forced marriage, early and unintended pregnancy, child labour, and other aspects affecting boys' and girls' learning and continuity of education. It is also critically important that systems reform align with the principles of equity and inclusiveness. For instance, data collection, analysis, evidence-based sector planning, financing and implementation of interventions need to take into account the gaps that exist and probably will have widened post COVID-19 period.

Address the Learning Crisis: The most marginalised children are lagging behind in learning outcomes. Systemic reforms must place greater emphasis on the early grades, and on the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy. It is likely that teacher shortages will be magnified by the pandemic, and a likelihood that the amount of contact time that students have with teachers will be reduced due to shortened school days and other strategies for reducing risk of transmission. In order to minimise the impact on learning, teachers should be deployed to focus on developing foundational skills in the early grades.

Equity financing of education: It is important to advocate for better financing of education and securing of current education resources and sources in the context of the economic impacts of COVID-19. For Instance, internationally agreed targets of 4-6% of GDP or 15-20% of public expenditure should be allocated to the education sector, with at least 10% allocated to pre-primary level while ensuring equitable allocation of resources to most marginalized populations coupled with policies directed towards ensuring inclusion of the most marginalized learners.

Engagement of parents and caregivers: Children are now spending more time at home with remote learning modalities and thus bringing new role for parents and caregivers on supporting effective learning at home and ensuring online safety for those using the internet. It is important that education systems include training support not just for teachers but also for parents and caregivers. Such training support will include mechanisms shared and understood by teachers, parents and care givers to monitor and provide feedback on the progress of learning done remotely.