



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Education
Sector



2020 Global Education Meeting

Extraordinary Session on Education post-COVID-19

Background document

Presentation

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the most severe disruption in education systems in history. In his Policy Brief released on 4 August, the UN Secretary-General warned of a “generational catastrophe” that could undermine decades of progress and deepen entrenched inequalities, and called upon national authorities and the international community to come together to place education at the forefront of recovery agendas and protect investment in education.

While it remains uncertain how the global health crisis will unfold, collective political commitment must be galvanized at the highest level to prioritize education in the recovery phase, with a view to accelerating progress toward the SDG 4-Education 2030 Agenda in the Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. It is against this backdrop that UNESCO, with support of the Governments of Ghana, Norway and the United Kingdom, is convening the extraordinary session of the Global Education Meeting (2020 GEM), in line with the provisions of the Education 2030 Framework for Action, to generate commitment around priority actions to mitigate learning losses, protect education financing and strengthen the resilience of education systems, by placing a stronger focus on equity and inclusion.

The themes of the 2020 GEM are informed by the evidence and recommendations of the UN Secretary-General’s Policy Brief and the White Paper of the #SaveOurFuture campaign, while maintaining the universal relevance, lifelong perspective, holistic and humanistic nature of the SDG 4-Education 2030 agenda.

Contents

Theme 1. Protect domestic and international financing of education	3
Theme 2. Reopen schools safely	9
Theme 3. Focus on inclusion, equity and gender equality	13
Theme 4. Reimagine teaching and learning.....	16
Theme 5. Harness equitable connectivity and technologies for learning	19
Charting the way forward: Global cooperation for education in a post-COVID-19 world	22

Photo credits cover page: © Kwame Amo/Shutterstock.com

Theme 1. Protect domestic and international financing of education

Context

The health crisis is also an economic and education crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed many national health systems. Uncertainty over its contagiousness and its deadliness led governments around the world to impose lockdowns, threatening billions of livelihoods and to close schools and universities, keeping 1.6 billion students at home. Both the economic and education crises have been fuelled by deep and multiple inequalities, which have been suddenly brought into sharper relief.

COVID-19 will slow down progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and calls for additional resources to mitigate impact. With an average school closure duration of 60 days,¹ past experience from other crises suggests that progress towards key SDG 4 targets, which was already off-track,² will slow down if not reverse. Some marginalized students may not return to school when they reopen, while all students – and especially the more disadvantaged – will need support to make up for lost time. Based on the UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank joint survey, it is estimated that 31% of learners in low- and middle-income countries were not reached by distance learning.³ Even when learning continued, it was a poor substitute for classroom instruction. In addition, there are costs to reckon with when it comes to reopening schools safely. However, by spending more now, governments can prevent the worst-case education outcomes of this crisis, thereby lessening later costs as well as securing a better future for the learners of the COVID-19 generation. The World Bank report estimates a loss of US\$10 trillion in earnings over time for this generation of students.⁴

Immediate responses to COVID-19 have not included education

An unprecedented financial crunch has hit the Global North and South. Economic activity came to an abrupt halt and there is continuing uncertainty over the long-term effects on trade and other sectors. A sharp recession, with detrimental effects on public revenue-raising capacity and budget allocations, is expected. The Global North is likely to be hit harder: its GDP is expected to decline by 8% in 2020, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) June 2020 World Economic Outlook.⁵ But the downturn also affects the Global South in many ways: while its GDP is expected to fall by 3%, there will be variable effects, with considerable distributional consequences, on the main financial flows, including foreign direct investment, private debt and portfolio equity, remittances and official development assistance (ODA).

Massive stimulus packages have been created to deal with the crisis. Governments have reacted swiftly to the recession, announcing massive interventions to protect workers affected by lockdown and their families, to safeguard activity sectors most impacted by the crisis and to promote a shift from declining activities to those with growth potential. A total of 1,055 social protection schemes were introduced across nearly all countries from March to mid-July, under three broad categories: social assistance (e.g. cash or in-kind transfers), social insurance and labour market programmes (e.g.

¹ UN. 2020. UN News - [Emergency for global education, as fewer than half world's students cannot return to school](#). New York: UN

² UNESCO. 2019. [Meeting commitments: are countries on track to achieve SDG 4?](#). Paris: UNESCO

³ UNICEF. 2020. [COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures?](#). New York: UNICEF

⁴ World Bank. 2020. [Simulating the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on schooling and learning outcomes: A set of global estimates](#), Washington, DC: World Bank

⁵ IMF. 2020. [World Economic Outlook Update](#). Washington, DC: IMF

wage subsidies).⁶ Meanwhile, all countries have announced recovery plans, focussing on fiscal stimulus packages, often complemented with monetary and macro-financial measures or measures regarding their exchange rate or balance of payments.⁷

Education and training receive a minor share of stimulus packages. According to one compilation, COVID-19 response funding up to mid-September adds up to US\$20.4 trillion, mostly provided by governments (59%) and multilateral donors (36%). Education receives just US\$19.2 billion, or 0.09%. Most of that funding comes from multilateral donors (84%), representing 0.22% of their response, compared with 0.015% for governments.⁸ Country-level information confirms this relative neglect of education. The few social protection programmes related to education, such as school feeding schemes in 27 countries and training schemes in 23 countries, are concentrated in Europe and East Asia, which already had stronger training systems prior to the crisis.⁹ According to the IMF policy tracker, only 37 out of 196 countries cover education or training in their fiscal stimulus packages, including 13 high, 12 upper middle, 7 lower middle and 5 low income countries.¹⁰

Public expenditure on education is expected to fall

Governments, the main funders of education, face multiple demands on their budgets. The 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report estimated that annual spending on education was at US\$4.7 trillion worldwide. Governments account for 79.3% of total spending, households for 20.4% and donors for 0.3% globally (although donors account for 12% of expenditure in low-income countries¹¹). With the economic impact of COVID-19 anticipated to be far more severe than that of the 2008 global financial crisis, government capacity to raise revenues will be seriously tested, while education is expected to continue to face stiff competition from other sectors even after the stimulus packages have been mobilized.

⁶ Gentilini et al. 2020. [Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A real-time review of Country Measures](#). Washington, DC: World Bank

⁷ IMF. 2020. [Policy tracker](#). Washington, DC: IMF

⁸ Devex. 2020. Funding the response to COVID-19.

<https://public.tableau.com/profile/devexdevdata#!/vizhome/COVIDFundingvisualisation/COVID-19funding> (accessed 22 September 2020)

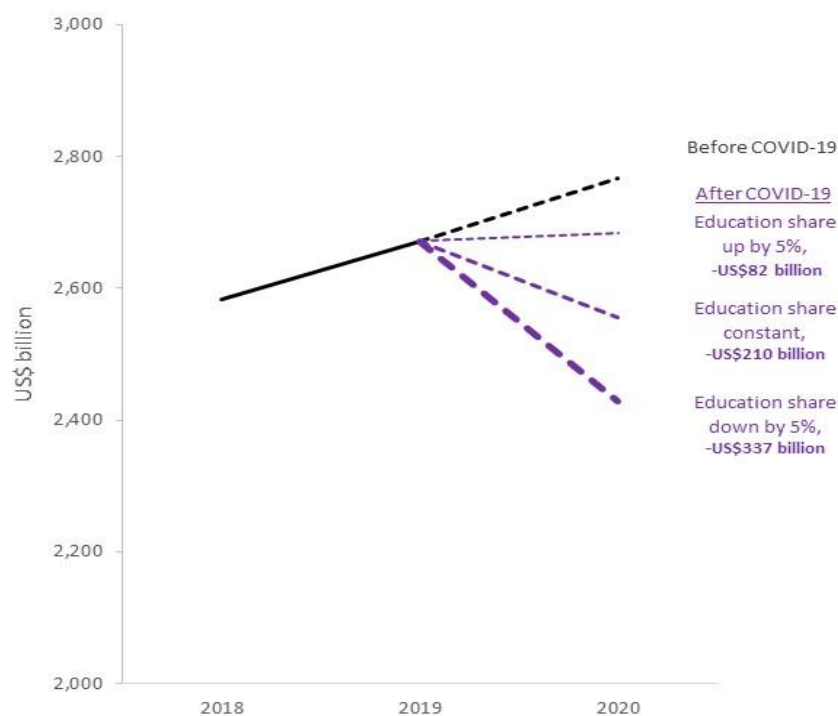
⁹ Gentilini et al. 2020. [Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A real-time review of Country Measures](#). Washington, DC: World Bank

¹⁰ IMF. 2020. [World Economic Outlook Update](#). Washington, DC: IMF

¹¹ UNESCO. 2018. [Global Education Monitoring Report, 2019: Migration, Displacement and Education: Building Bridges, not Walls](#). Paris: UNESCO

Figure 1. Even if governments protect the budget share of education, spending may fall by 8% in 2020

Public education expenditure under alternative scenarios on budget share of education in 2020



Note: Estimates refer to 132 countries representing 60% of GDP.

Source: UNESCO calculations based on UIS data and IMF World Economic Outlook data (October 2019 and April 2020).

Even if the budget share of education remains stable, public education spending may be 8% lower in 2020. Globally, the share of education in public budgets has remained constant at about 14.5% for the past two decades.¹² Even if countries maintain the education share in their budget at the same level in 2020, drops in GDP and fiscal revenue may result in public education expenditure being 8%, or US\$210 billion, lower than in 2019, according to UNESCO’s estimates based on data from the IMF and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).¹³ If the share falls by 5% because countries choose to prioritize health or social protection, then education spending levels in these countries could fall by 12% or US\$337 billion (**Figure 1**).

Countries need to resist pressures to reduce education budgets

The financing gap for achieving SDG 4 in the world’s poorest countries was already high. With progress towards the SDG 4 targets having been below expectations, the Global Education Monitoring Report team estimated that the total cost of achieving SDG 4 in low- and lower-middle-income countries by 2030, even before COVID-19 hit, was about US\$5 trillion, more or less at the same level as estimated in 2015¹⁴. Out of the US\$504 billion annual cost, it is estimated that US\$356 billion would be covered by available domestic financing resources, leaving an annual financing gap of US\$148 billion, or 29% of the total cost.

¹² UNESCO. 2020. [Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020: Inclusion and Education: All Means All](#). Paris: UNESCO.

¹³ UNESCO. 2020. [Impact of COVID-19 on Public Resources for Education](#). Paris; UNESCO

¹⁴ *ibid.*

The education impact of COVID-19 is piling up additional costs. Already facing a large financing gap in their efforts to achieve SDG 4, low- and lower-middle-income countries now have to contend with the additional challenge of COVID-19, just like the richest countries. There are four main cost drivers related to COVID-19. First, remediation classes are needed to address the loss of learning, especially for disadvantaged students who followed fewer classes from a distance or had an inappropriate learning environment at home. Second, countries will need to design and implement re-enrolment strategies consisting of national campaigns and incentives targeted at encouraging marginalized students to return to school: 16 million children of pre-primary, primary and secondary school age may otherwise drop out.¹⁵ Third, even if re-enrolment strategies are deployed, some students will not return to school and thus governments will need to provide second chance education solutions. Fourth, schools and classrooms will require new or refurbished infrastructure and equipment and potentially additional teaching and ancillary staff, to respect public health protocols; as of 2018, only 24% of schools in the average low-income and 73% in the average lower-middle-income country had basic handwashing facilities.

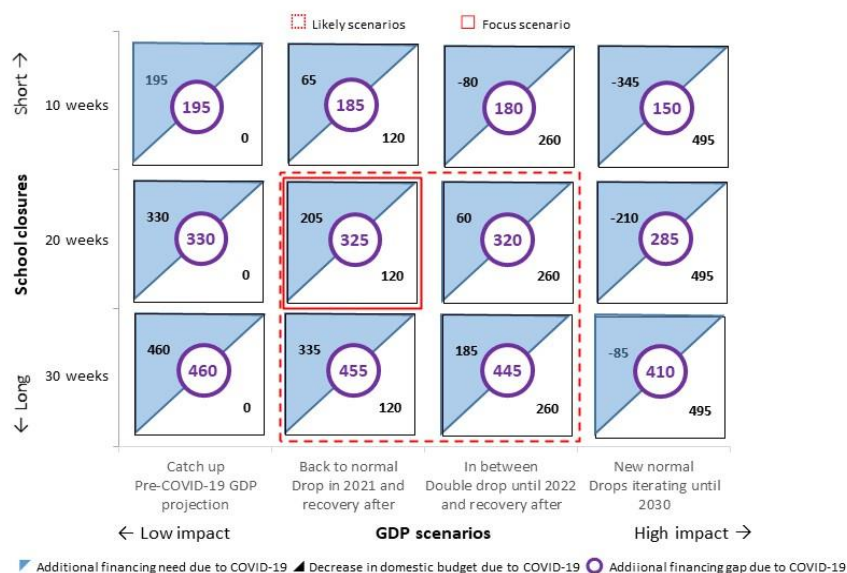
School closure and economic growth scenarios will affect the cost of education recovery. How these four cost drivers affect the ultimate cost of the COVID-19 education response will depend on two exogenous factors. First, the longer the school closure, the higher the cost, because more students will need to be prevented from leaving school early and learning losses will be higher. Second, the longer the lockdowns and related constraints on economic activity, the greater the negative effect on GDP and on public revenue and spending capacities.

COVID-19 response costs add up to 31% of the financing gap in low- and lower-middle-income countries. Likely scenarios involve a 20- or 30-week school closure with one of two economic growth paths: under the first, growth will suffer a dent in 2020, but then return to the earlier trajectory, which will persist to 2030; in the second, more severe, path, growth will be negative twice before bouncing back. Under these scenarios, the additional financing needs range between US\$60 billion and US\$335 billion, while government spending on education will decline by between US\$120 billion and US\$260 billion, extending the financing gap by between US\$320 billion and US\$455 billion over the 10-year period to 2030 (**Figure 2**). Relative to the pre-COVID-19 annual financing gap of US\$148 billion, this is equivalent to an increase from 22% to 31%.

¹⁵ UN. 2020. [Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond](#). New York: UN

Figure 2: Under alternative school closure and GDP impact scenarios, COVID-19 will increase the financing gap for achieving SDG 4

Additional financing need, decrease in domestic budget and additional financing gap due to COVID-19 in low- and lower-middle-income countries, 2020–2030, by school closure and GDP scenarios, US\$ billion

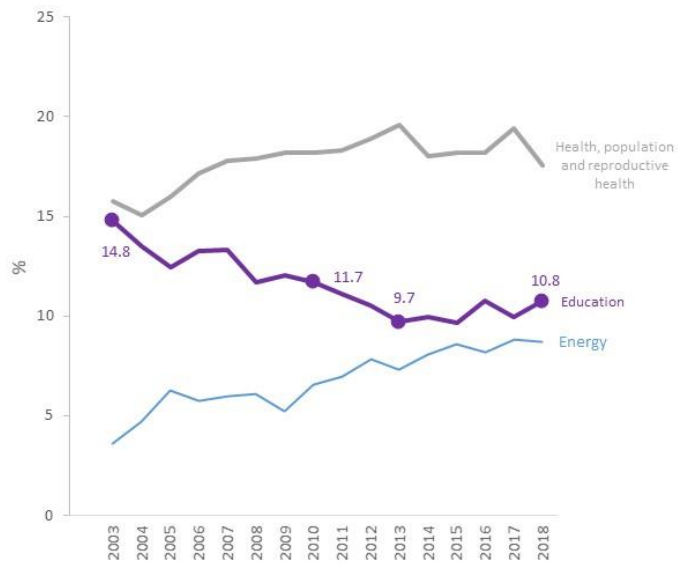


Source: Global Education Monitoring Report team calculations.

Donors need to resist pressures to reduce aid to education

Aid to education declined during the 2008 major financial crisis because donors did not prioritize education. The share of total ODA was unaffected by the 2008 financial crisis: it has remained constant at around 0.3% of OECD DAC countries' gross national income for the past 15 years, well below the target of 0.7%. Aid to education, however, reached a peak in 2010 but was still 9% below this level in 2014 before bouncing back to US\$15.6 billion in 2018, the highest amount ever recorded. However, the fall in aid to education was a result of education losing ground as a donor priority and unrelated to the financial crisis: the share of education in ODA fell from 14.8% in 2003 to 9.7% in 2013. It has since recovered a little to 10.8%, but it is still below 2010 levels. By contrast, sectors such as energy (from 3.6% in 2003 to 8.7% in 2018) and health, population and reproductive health (from 15% in 2004 to 19.6% in 2013) have made gains (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Education has been losing ground as a donor priority and has yet to recover its share
Share of selected sectors in allocable aid, 2003–2018



Source: Global Education Monitoring Report team analysis based on OECD CRS (2020).

Aid to education may not recover to its 2018 level before 2024. The current financial crisis is much more severe for donor countries, as recession in 2020 is expected to be at least twice as large as in 2008. Development programmes in education may be affected in two ways. First, the recession will reduce total aid allocations and second, donors may prioritize other sectors in response to the pandemic. Even if this second risk is ignored, aid to education is still expected to fall by 12%, or by up to US\$2 billion, in 2020–2022. This scenario would see aid to education return to 2018 levels not before 2024.

Theme 2. Reopen schools safely

Impact of COVID-19

Countries across the globe are gradually reopening or planning for the reopening of schools and other education institutions, after several months of closure, as part of wider efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19. In this context, governments, in collaboration with their development partners and other stakeholders, have been exploring and working to design the most appropriate approaches to implement health protocols and physical distancing measures, based on the best available evidence for safety and disease control, while ensuring smooth curriculum transition to meet learning objectives.

Protecting the physical and mental health of the school population and preparing for a potential viral resurgence are shared concerns among countries, irrespective of their context. Additional challenges to be addressed include the consequences of COVID-19 and prolonged social isolation, both on the education system and on the school community. School closures have brought about a major disruption in children's lives, affecting their socio-emotional development and well-being, as well as their social life and relationships at school, which will require special attention when schools reopen.

One critical condition to reopening is to ensure a safe return to physical premises, implementing infection control measures such as physical distancing and respiratory and hand hygiene measures in school premises and transport. School closures and reopening may become increasingly common in the context of COVID-19, as the virus continues to circulate.

Experiences in most high-income economies show little to no measurable impact of school reopening on increasing community transmission rates. In primary school settings in particular there has been limited measurable transmission among children or between children and adults. Emerging evidence drawn from Eastern and Southern Africa also suggests that schools have not been associated with significant increases in community transmission. However, where local transmission rates are more prevalent or where safety measures cannot be universally implemented – because of crowded classrooms, lack of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, or crowded school transportation services – decision-making becomes more complex. In addition, different conditions in low-income countries, such as crowded classrooms, poor ventilation and a lack of means to implement physical distancing and infection control, and a prevalence of households that include elderly people as well children, need to be considered.

From a pedagogical perspective, the immediate preoccupations to address when reopening education institutions include learning loss, how to assess it and offer remedial action, exacerbation of existing learning gaps and inequalities and emergence of new ones, and an increased risk of dropout. Managing the back-to-school transition will require remedial action and possible adjustments, including changes to the school calendar, learning objectives, delivery modalities, assessment and certification practices. Administrative and staffing issues to address include absenteeism and the potential losses in the education workforce, the need for additional education personnel to implement physical distancing measures, teacher workloads and the demand for additional skills for teachers in, for example, blended education delivery modalities and psycho-social support. The demanding task of enabling continued learning in the crisis context, often with limited or no resources and training, calls for deeper examination of how teachers have been prepared and supported during the period of school closure and of what lessons have been learned and will be applied once schools reopen.

Decisions around ensuring continuity of school-based learning differ from country to country as they depend to a great extent on the school calendar. In some countries, school reopening occurred at the end of the school year; in others, at the beginning or in the middle. This raised different considerations

and priorities in each context. Various guidelines and resources have already been produced on school reopening, addressing key concerns around timing, conditions and processes, as well as the preparedness of the education system and the school population to resume classroom-based learning, especially the joint *Framework for reopening schools* by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and World Food Programme (WFP),¹⁶ which serves as an important reference on this topic.

Lessons learned

Back-to-school strategies need to ensure the readiness of education systems for school reopening and learning continuity and as well as system resilience to anticipate, reduce the risk of and address a possible viral resurgence or other crises. Key steps education systems have been taking to ensure safe school reopening include the following:

- 1) Protect from infection
- 2) Care for physical, mental and psycho-social well-being
- 3) Support learning and the learning process
- 4) Prepare for resurgence and future crises

When it comes to reopening schools, the ‘consult, coordinate and communicate’ approach is key. School leaders should consult and communicate with the community actively, transparently and widely, in order to ensure a smooth transition back to schools, where no one is left behind. School reopening has to be prepared and planned in advance, starting with careful assessment of the sanitary situation and coping capacities, developing or updating a data- and evidence-based contingency plan, establishing protocols and procedures and training school leaders and teachers on these and adjusting directions and interventions in light of evolving sanitary situations.

Below are lessons learnt from past and current crises that education systems can use as practical takeaways when implementing the back-to-school transition. The list is not exhaustive and can be complemented by other appropriate actions based on local contexts and needs.

Protect from infection

Containing the further spread of COVID-19 continues to be the overall priority of education systems as schools reopen. Health protocols, with clear hygiene measures and guidelines on preventing, detecting and controlling infections, should be produced and communicated to schools and families and caregivers. A key strategy recommended and now employed in many countries is called ‘cohorting’ (keeping students and teachers in small groups that do not mix, also referred to as bubbles, capsules, circles, safe squads). Following this approach means that if a learner or teacher develops symptoms or is confirmed as having the virus, only their bubble will need to quarantine and seek a test where possible.¹⁷ Other strategies include staggering the timing of school days (e.g. start/end, breaks, bathroom breaks, meals) and alternating physical presence (e.g. alternate days, alternate shifts).

Special efforts should be made to reach vulnerable groups who might have less access to information channels. School administrators need to raise awareness among the school population and ensure these health protocols are implemented. Available resources on this topic include the aforementioned joint *Framework* and the *Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of*

¹⁶ UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, WFP. 2020. [Framework for reopening schools](#). Paris: UNESCO

¹⁷ WHO. 2020. [Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19](#). Geneva: WHO

COVID-19,¹⁸ issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF and UNESCO, as well as other partners.¹⁹

Education systems should prepare critical policies, procedures and financing plans to improve schooling, with a focus on safe operations; invest in water, sanitation and hygiene to mitigate risks; and actively monitor health indicators, expanding to focus on well-being and protection.

Care for physical, mental and psycho-social well-being

Education personnel and learners will return to school after months of confinement, social isolation and dealing with COVID-19 directly or indirectly. Caring for their physical, mental and psycho-social well-being should be a priority to ensure their preparedness for teaching and learning.

The prolonged school closures have brought about a major interruption in children's lives. Schools are important spaces for children's development, not only for facilitating learning but also as spaces of socialization, protection and socio-emotional development. Lack of access to school may, in some cases, also mean lack of access to nutrition, protection and health and other social services, which is particularly detrimental for children who live in disadvantaged or unsafe homes. Social isolation imposed by confinement measures have also kept children away from vital activities for their development, such as play and social interaction. A Save the Children survey of over 6,000 children and parents in Finland, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States of America reveals that almost one in four children are dealing with feelings of anxiety, with many at risk of depression.²⁰

Health issues compromise children's ability to learn and schools must provide holistic approaches to address their learning, physical health and socio-emotional needs. It is also important to promote the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and rights of all young people, through the provision of comprehensive sexuality education; to ensure adolescents' access to SRH commodities and services such as online counselling and hotlines; and to direct families to existing and good-quality online resources. Options include hiring health specialists to support students, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds,²¹ and dedicating the first weeks of school reopening to assessing students' emotional status and helping them deal with their feelings (e.g. Mexico). In France, the Ministry of Education (MoE) published a guide on how to manage students' emotions.²² In China, the MoE issued guidance for strengthening mental health education in primary and secondary schools.²³

Support learning and the learning process

Once schools reopen, decisions about resuming classroom-based learning, adjusting the curriculum, textbooks and pedagogy to ensure continuity of teaching and learning will depend on the school calendar in each country. Adjustments will also be necessary due to physical distancing rules, which allow only a specific number of students per class and which may necessitate a blended approach of

¹⁸ WHO. 2020. [Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19](#). Geneva: WHO

¹⁹ Global Education Cluster. 2020. [Safe back to school: A Practitioner's Guide](#). GEC; A systems-based framework for reducing SARS-CoV-2 transmission in reopened schools. Lancet Child and Adolescent Health (Viewpoint submission)

²⁰ Save the Children. 2020. 2020 Press Release. <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2020-press-releases/children-at-risk-of-psychological-distress-from-coronavirus-lockdown> (accessed 22 September 2020)

²¹ The Conversation. 2020. 4 strategies to support vulnerable students when schools reopen after coronavirus. <https://theconversation.com/4-strategies-to-support-vulnerable-students-when-schools-reopen-after-coronavirus-136201> (accessed 22 September 2020)

²² Ministry of Education of the Republic of France. 2020. [Ecouter la parole des élèves en retour de confinement](#). Paris: MoE of France

²³ Ministry of Education of China. 2020. [Guiding suggestions for strengthening mental health education in the new semester of primary and secondary schools nationwide](#). Beijing: MoE of China.

both classroom-based and distance learning. Countries at the beginning or in the middle of the school year may be more concerned with ensuring continuity of learning, identifying learning loss, readjusting learning objectives and priorities, implementing remedial and/or accelerated learning programmes, using blended learning approaches (classroom and distance learning) and considering assessment modalities. Countries at the end of the school year may be more focused on offering psychosocial support, teaching about living and dealing with COVID-19, assessing learning loss, organizing exams and planning for the next school year. One priority is organizing examinations and assuring certification of qualifications, especially for graduating students or students transitioning to higher levels of education. In Kenya, the aim is to hold school assessments once schools reopen to determine the student level of learning and thus design appropriate remedial programmes. Vietnam conducted learning assessments when schools reopened to identify students' knowledge gaps and to group students according to learning goals (e.g. students wishing to enter top universities will join more advanced classes). Singapore decided to lighten the workload for graduating cohorts by removing selected topics from the curriculum.

Prepare for resurgence and future crises

The COVID-19 crisis revealed that many countries were unprepared for crisis response. One of the major lessons from the current situation is the need to strengthen the resilience of education systems to better cope with emergencies. Education systems need to anticipate and prepare for multiple scenarios of possible viral resurgence, from isolated, localized cases to a more widespread wave of infection. Preparing for resurgence will require system readiness to protect both the health of the school population and the learning process.

From a health perspective, protocols need to be in place to prevent, detect (as early as possible) and control COVID-19 in schools. Plans should be made to support teachers, children and parents and caregivers if re-closures become necessary. Learning materials/platforms, public health information and communications should be offered in multiple, accessible formats and necessary services and facilities – particularly for WASH – should be accessible to all learners and education personnel. As indicated in the *Framework for reopening schools*, SRH services are also of particular importance, given that early and unintended pregnancies increase during periods of school closure, as does resuming and catching up on comprehensive sexuality education. Regular communication and collaboration are required between education and health experts in monitoring the evolution of the pandemic, at national, local and school levels. Based on the infection rates observed, individual, localized, or country-wide closures might be needed.

From the pedagogical perspective, countries need to consider blending school-based and distance learning education delivery modalities, to ensure a smooth transition between the two (or to use them in combination) if and when the necessity arises. This means adjusting the curriculum and teaching and learning materials, preparing for necessary communication channels (e.g. internet, tablets, TV and radio), making teacher and staff contingency plans and providing teacher and student training and support, drawing on lessons learnt from ongoing practices and past experiences during the pandemic.

Theme 3. Focus on inclusion, equity and gender equality

“The harmful effects of this pandemic will not be distributed equally. They are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries and in the poorest neighbourhoods and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations.”²⁴

Impact of COVID-19 on inclusion, equity and gender equality

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and is expected to deepen or add new layers of, education inequalities, marginalization and exclusion. At least 463 million, or nearly one-third of, students around the globe remain cut off from education, mainly due to a lack of remote learning policies or lack of equipment needed for learning at home.²⁵ About 40% of low- and lower-middle-income countries have not supported learners at risk of exclusion during this crisis, such as the poor, linguistic minorities and learners with disabilities.²⁶

Social and digital divides based on gender, ability, location, language, wealth and other characteristics have put the most disadvantaged at risk of learning loss and dropout.²⁷ In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, 89% of learners do not have access to household computers and 82% lack internet access.²⁸ The lack of accessible software and learning materials is likely to deepen the gap for students with disabilities, while limited mother language materials and digital skills are limiting access for indigenous learners.²⁹ Even in households where online learning is an option, in many countries, concerns about girls’ online safety mean that girls have more limited access to remote learning than boys.³⁰

Public health outbreaks usually have distinct gendered impacts and, because of that, preparedness and response efforts must understand the gender dimensions of these crises to avoid widening inequalities and seize opportunities to advance gender equality. Evidence from past crises shows that girls can be particularly vulnerable in the face of prolonged school closures, particularly in low- and low-middle-income countries. School closures have been found to exacerbate rates of girls’ and women’s unpaid care work, limiting the time available to learn at home.³¹ The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. Quarantines have placed many girls at heightened exposure to gender-based violence³² including sexual exploitation³³ and early and unintended pregnancies,³⁴ while also removing access to vital services for protection, nutrition, health and well-being.

Ensuring continuity of learning and safe return to school for all students is needed to protect advances in education made over the last two decades, where the number of out-of-school children has decreased by nearly 125 million.³⁵ This includes important gains made in girls’ education in recent decades, with broader immediate and longer-term effects on the achievement of the SDGs.³⁶

²⁴ UN. 2020. [Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children](#). New York2: UN.

²⁵ UNICEF. [COVID-19: Are Children Able to Continue Learning during School Closures?](#) New York: UNICEF.

²⁶ UNESCO. 2020. [Inclusion and education: All means all. Global Education Monitoring Report](#). Paris: UNESCO.

²⁷ UN. 2020. [Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond](#). New York: UN.

²⁸ UNESCO. 2020. [Startling digital divides in distance learning emerge. UNESCO Press release](#). Paris: UNESCO.

²⁹ UNICEF. 2020. [UNICEF call to action: Indigenous communities and the right to education in times of COVID-19](#). New York: UNICEF.

³⁰ UNICEF. [COVID-19: Are Children Able to Continue Learning During School Closures?](#) New York: UNICEF.

³¹ UNFPA. 2020. [State of the World Population Report 2020](#). New York: UNFPA.

³² World Vision. 2020. [COVID-19 Aftershocks: A Perfect Storm](#). World Vision.

³³ UNFPA. 2020. [State of the World Population Report 2020](#). New York: UNFPA.

³⁴ Plan International. 2014. [Young Lives on Lockdown](#). London: Plan International.

³⁵ UNICEF 2020. [A New Era for Girls](#). New York: UNICEF.

³⁶ UNESCO. 2020. [Gender Dimensions of School Closures](#). Paris: UNESCO.

The return to school provides a unique opportunity to ensure that all children who were out of school before and during the pandemic are included within all school reopening plans and that plans to ensure continuity of learning and support for all students, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, are put in place for future crises and disruptions to education.³⁷

Lessons learned, good practice and priority actions

The pandemic has highlighted the need for an education system based on the fundamental principles of inclusion, equity and non-discrimination. It shows us that children and youth who are most vulnerable to exclusion from – or to marginalization within – education systems face complex and interconnected barriers that have an impact on enrolment, retention, learning and broader health, well-being and protection outcomes. Before COVID-19, education systems were already facing huge challenges in treating all individuals fairly and equally regardless of their identity (e.g. religion, gender, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation) and their condition (disabilities, access to transportation or internet).

Access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) was an issue before and during COVID-19 and it remains a challenge in many countries. It is crucial to understand how we can ensure that technology does not widen the gap between access and quality of learning and what additional human support is required to ensure that equity is not undermined.

As some schools and education institutions around the world have reopened and others are preparing to do so, governments, education sector officials, community leaders, teachers and school staff should look for lessons learned from past and current crises, especially as these actors now have the opportunity to *build back equal*. This requires holistic approaches that transform education systems, prioritize resilience and address the key bottlenecks and barriers to education.³⁸

Good strategies, practices and innovations

In Peru, the '*Aprendo en casa*' programme offers educational content to students during school closures through digital media, TV and radio. The content is available in Spanish and in 10 indigenous languages, in addition to sign language.

In the Philippines, print, digital, radio and TV-based instructional materials are available in accessible formats and the 17 provincial district offices must report on the extent of preparedness and readiness to deliver remote learning for children with disabilities.

In Sierra Leone, building on lessons learned from Ebola, radio-based public service announcements have been used to build girls' life skills and provide information on sources of support for those exposed to gender-based violence and other risks. New legislation is also in place to support adolescent mothers' return to school.

As part of UNESCO's Global Education Coalition, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNGEI, Plan International and the Malala Fund have developed a *Girls Back to School Guide*, promoting attention to gender and marginalized girls in the development of school reopening plans.

³⁷ UNESCO. 2016. [Leaving No One Behind](#). Paris: UNESCO.

³⁸ UNESCO, UNICEF, Plan International, UNGEI and the Malala Fund. 2020. [Build Back Equal: Girls Back to School Guide](#). Paris: UNESCO.

Priority actions to be implemented in the next 12 months

- Collect disaggregated data to measure the reach and use of remote learning modalities and the return of students to school, to better understand learning loss, dropout and other forms of exclusion and to inform targeted action to promote equity, inclusion and gender equality.
- Expand access to online learning for marginalized learners through temporary free internet data packages, zero-rate traffic to educational content, or other similar measures, while introducing safeguarding measures against online violence and abuse, including equipping girls and boys with the knowledge and skills they need to stay safe online.
- In addition to online solutions, establish other remote learning methods to meet divergent learning needs, capacities and time demands in resource-poor environments. Such programmes retain links to education, support continuity of learning and have been found to positively influence family and community attitudes on education.
- Address the intersecting health, social and protection issues that affect children during school closures and safeguard access to vital services (e.g. school meals, health support) often provided by schools. An integrated, gender-responsive and multi-sectoral approach to planning for school health, nutrition and WASH is also needed to ensure the (re-)establishment of health-promoting learning environments and essential services that address all children's needs.
- Adapt school reopening policies and practices to expand access to marginalized groups and incentivize returns to school following the crisis. This might include waiving school fees, expanding access to cash transfers for learners from marginalized groups and investing in inclusive and gender-responsive infrastructure.
- Promote inclusive decision-making on COVID-19 education response and recovery planning, from needs assessments to the design of remote learning opportunities and set up other interventions to plan and monitor school reopening and promote lifelong learning, being sure to include perspectives from learners and teachers from marginalized communities.
- Adopt a system-wide approach to school reopening which aims to build back equal, taking steps to remove bias and discrimination within and across education systems, from teacher recruitment and training to curriculum and materials development and ensure school environments are resilient, safe and free from violence.

Theme 4. Reimagine teaching and learning

Impact of COVID-19

While 69 million teachers must be recruited by 2030 to meet SDG 4,³⁹ the COVID-19 pandemic directly affected 63 million primary and secondary teachers. With little warning, schools closed and teachers were required to conduct distance teaching. Given the lack of households with the necessary ICT to allow teachers and pupils to connect, global efforts to ensure continuity of learning were compromised. Teaching quality remains a challenge globally, especially in low-income countries, yielding a workforce that lacks the skills and confidence to effectively transfer teaching online.⁴⁰ Teachers are under significant psychological and socio-emotional strain and lack a network and system of support. In many cases, teachers have the double duty of tending to their own children at home while trying to teach remotely. This is often the case for female teachers in particular, who are more likely to bear more responsibility for childcare and family chores. Meanwhile, income and job security concerns have increased for many teachers (especially private sector and contract teachers) due to massive long-term closures.⁴¹

Widespread school closures presented monumental challenges, but they also allowed for renewed opportunity to demonstrate leadership, creativity and innovation. With little time to prepare and often with limited guidance and resources, teachers have had to modify curricula and adapt lesson plans to carry on with instruction using high-, low- and no-tech solutions. Where possible, teachers adopted synchronous and asynchronous forms of online teaching. They lectured live, posted lessons online or interacted with students using mobile devices. In countries with poor or no connectivity, teachers prepared take-home packages, while others visited homes to pick up and drop off students' work.

Teachers have been key to ensuring that learning and communication with students and their families continued while schools were closed. Their role during reopening is just as important. Around the world, teachers will need to work individually and collectively to find solutions and create new learning opportunities. Teachers require training and support on adjusting curricula and assessment methods to measure and mitigate learning losses and prevent vulnerable students from dropping out. They also require continued training on remote teaching, ICTs and alternative flexible pedagogies for online, blended and offline learning during future school closures. They need training on health and safety protocols to ensure a safe return to school and finally they require psycho-social support to deal with stress and to learn how to support students and other teachers in turn.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and the conditions of learning has been huge. Just as teachers are destabilized by the disruption, so are learners, families and communities who have seen their well-being and livelihoods profoundly affected. Restrictions on movement, social isolation and the deprivation of traditional learning methods have led to increased pressure, stress and anxiety for young people, their families and communities, raising more fundamental concerns about a potential erosion of human rights now and post-crisis. These conditions have been further exacerbated by the spread of conspiracy theories and hate speech. Building on the ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers (1966) and the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997) that call for prioritizing teachers'

³⁹ UNESCO UIS. 2016. [The world needs almost 69 million new teachers to reach the 2030 education goals](#). Montreal: UIS.

⁴⁰ UNESCO. 2020. [COVID-19: A global crisis for teaching and learning](#). Paris: UNESCO

⁴¹ Teacher Task Force. 2020. [How the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting contract teachers in sub-Saharan Africa](#). Paris: UNESCO.

labour rights, health and well-being, the Teacher Task Force (TTF) Call for Action advocates for the renewed protection of teachers' rights even during these uncertain times.⁴²

One valuable lesson from the pandemic is a better understanding of the magnitude of the impact of climate change on all aspects of life on our planet. It has created an opportunity to appreciate the vital importance of working collaboratively beyond national borders to mitigate the impacts of global challenges and seek viable solutions. People around the world have experienced in concrete terms the connections between the local and the global. In this sense, the pandemic has also provided an occasion to rethink learning content and to make it more relevant to global and local challenges. These issues must be given more importance as we build back education systems: global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and rising intolerance have continued to accelerate and are becoming increasingly urgent. The pandemic has also brought home the need to understand and deal with complexity and interlinkages and as well as people–planet relationships.

Lessons learned

Though the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning are still not fully understood, emerging trends clearly point to the need to learn quickly from the crisis. We must reorganize educational priorities so that education systems address the full range of learners' needs and contribute actively and responsibly to building the 'new and better normal'.

There is also a risk to be averted: jeopardizing learners' futures and our own, by extending, our 'emergency mode' beyond what is necessary. To do so would, while allowing for highly focussed interventions, lead to a narrowing of perspective that could undermine our ability to achieve the humanistic vision of SDG 4 in any near future.

As far as learning is concerned, the following actions should be considered:

- Scale up and strengthen measures to provide meaningful and relevant education for sustainable development and global citizenship. In a context of growing uncertainty as to the evolution and impact of the pandemic on society and learners (their life-conditions, rights and freedoms, future prospects, etc.), it is paramount that learners be equipped with the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviours they need to understand and cope with the complexity of life and become responsible agents of a more just, sustainable and peaceful world.
- Support the adoption of innovative and transformative pedagogies that make full use of community resources in terms of talent, expertise, teaching materials and opportunities. This will sustain learners' motivation, connect learners to their communities and environments and bolster their commitment to becoming active contributors to the building of a 'new and better normal', guided by the principles of sustainable development and global citizenship.
- Promote holistic learning approaches that give ample and appropriate room in the curriculum to social and emotional learning (SEL) at all levels of education (formal, non-formal and informal). SEL-related competencies should be considered a part of core learning outcomes within a positive psycho-social school environment, with sufficient time allocated to them in curricular and extra-curricular activities. Effective SEL programmes should also be part of a larger ecosystem, reaching beyond the classroom and bringing together the whole school, families, communities and media.

⁴² Teacher Task Force. 2020. [Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak Call for Action on Teachers](#). Paris: UNESCO.

When it comes to teaching, the following actions should be considered:

- Increase investments to improve the quality of initial teacher education and to provide high-quality professional development for in-service teachers. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to better prepare teachers for implementing remote teaching and new pedagogies for hybrid learning with digital technologies. While much teacher capacity-building was rushed in to mitigate knowledge and skills gaps, there is a need to rebalance this approach and aim for a lifelong model of teacher development, building a new cadre of talented and professional teaching teams with a collaborative mindset.
- Promote the protection of teachers' rights and working conditions through social and policy dialogue that builds trust between the education workforce and decision-makers, and democratizes and enhances the legitimacy of the policymaking process. With an estimated 80% of global teachers fearing that it is unsafe to return to school,⁴³ measures to ensure health and safety at schools for learners and staff should be adapted to local contexts, in line with ratified international conventions, national laws and health measures.
- Adopt evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning. Teacher education and teaching practice should be informed by data and scientific knowledge. Teachers' pedagogical competencies should include solid knowledge of how to conduct assessment and use assessment data to ensure correct diagnostics for improving learning. At policy level, collecting timely and valid data on teachers and teaching can result in measures to drive more equitable policies and ensure that marginalized communities are better served by well-qualified teachers in this time of crisis and beyond.

⁴³ The National. 2020. Coronavirus: Four out of five teachers worldwide think it's not yet safe to return to schools. https://www.thenational.ae/world/coronavirus-four-out-of-five-teachers-worldwide-think-it-s-not-yet-safe-to-return-to-schools-1.1025557?fbclid=IwAR0JJCu-GQvjWSuQ_Tmxugg0Q5W4f8mQwXNKrer_kqElcB8Qxamsk9mCjz4 (accessed 22 September 2020)

Theme 5. Harness equitable connectivity and technologies for learning

Introduction

Abrupt and unresolved disruption to learning

The impact of COVID-19 on learning continuity has been nothing short of devastating. Due to global school closures, formal learning either stopped completely or was severely disrupted for the vast majority of the world's students, a situation without historical precedent. Unfortunately, learning disruptions due to the pandemic remain far from being resolved for most learners. More than half a year into the crisis, UNESCO estimates that one billion children, youth and adults (about two thirds of the global student population) continue to face major interruptions to their learning and schooling, ranging from across-the-board school closures to reduced or part-time academic schedules.⁴⁴ Many students have already accrued learning losses ranging from six months to one year, a deficit that could ripple through a generation, in the absence of bold remedial actions. The World Bank has projected the financial cost of this learning loss to be as high as US\$10 trillion or 10% of the global GDP.⁴⁵

Technology as the vital link to access learning opportunities

In an attempt to respond to the disruption, governments positioned technology as the primary – and, in many contexts, only – channel to maintain the continuity of formal learning. Investments were poured into efforts to make technological tools, rather than brick-and-mortar schools, the principal hubs of learning. In countries where digital networks and hardware were unavailable, technology was still the “Plan B” in the form of TV and radio,⁴⁶ ahead of take-home paper-based packages. Technology thus became a vital portal to learning abruptly shifted from classrooms to homes. While there have been various technology-enabled distance learning responses, governments focused most of their energies on connected digital technologies, even though the reach of these technologies is far from universal. Today, approximately half of the world's population (some 3.6 billion people) still lack an internet connection.⁴⁷ Even governments of countries with limited internet coverage tended to view the necessity of distance learning as a “forced opportunity” to accelerate overdue transformations to traditional educational models and embrace a digital future for learning.

Lessons learned

Mirroring and widening existing divides

The global shift to technology-dependent distance learning has largely failed to maintain formal learning for most students. This is primarily due to challenges faced by learners to access education provided through the internet and lower-tech technologies.⁴⁸ Simply said, a majority of students do not have the appropriate hardware, software, connectivity and digital skills required to find and use educational content dependent on technology. According to UN estimates, nearly 500 million students from pre-primary to upper-secondary school did not have any access to any remote learning—three quarters of those lived in the poorest households or rural areas.⁴⁹ More nuanced data showed

⁴⁴ UNESCO. 2020. [The Digital Transformation of Education: Connecting Schools, Empowering Learners](#). Paris: UNESCO.

⁴⁵ The World Bank. 2020. [Simulating the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on schooling and learning outcomes: A set of global estimates](#), Washington, DC: World Bank

⁴⁶ UNESCO. 2020. UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures <http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/survey-education-covid-school-closures/>

⁴⁷ UNESCO. 2020. [The Digital Transformation of Education: Connecting Schools, Empowering Learners](#). Paris: UNESCO.

⁴⁸ UNESCO. 2020. [Open and distance learning to support youth and adult learning](#). Paris: UNESCO

⁴⁹ UNICEF. 2020. [Promising practices for equitable remote learning](#). New York: UNICEF

disparities that followed and accentuated existing social, economic, gender, and geographic fault lines. Early expectations for a successful transformation to digital-first learning quickly gave way to sober recognition that the sudden pivot from classrooms to screens left hundreds of millions behind and posed a risk to education as human right, a public service and a common good.

Insufficient reach of technologies for learning

According to UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank survey data, two thirds of the surveyed low-income countries used radio and one third used TV programmes to provide primary education remotely, whereas most high-income countries offered synchronous and asynchronous online learning platforms as a primary option and broadcast technologies as a secondary or ‘backup’ option. Even when distance learning opportunities were offered, their reach was hugely variable. In high-income countries, offerings sometimes reached over 80% of the population, but this fell to less than 50% in low-income countries.⁵⁰ These shortfalls were attributable to digital divides and other hurdles, including technical barriers such as insufficient access to electricity, and human barriers such as limited education attainment and digital literacy.⁵¹ Even simple technologies like TV and radio were rarely inclusive or equitable, even if they helped vastly expand the reach of educational content. Survey data indicates that for the poorest 20% of households only 7% to 30% of families owned a radio and just 5% to 22% had a TV.⁵² Long-running efforts to bring internet connections to schools were of limited value during the pandemic, because schools were closed. For connectivity to have an educational impact, it needed, with rare exceptions, to branch all the way to households and individuals.

Human as well as technical challenges

While access to connected technology is a prerequisite for distance learning, it is, in or of itself, insufficient to ensure educational continuity. The success or failure of approaches rested on people as much as networks and devices. The crisis has shown that the human dimensions of distance learning – from the ability of teachers to use digital tools to the capacities of education planners to generalize digital learning solutions – pose serious barriers to the effective provision of technology-dependent education.⁵³ Reengineering education systems to move learning to technology portals requires new skills, outlooks and competencies from everyone involved in education. The high dependency on parents led to supercharged inequities due to differences in parents’ education levels, pedagogical and technical skills, time availability and work obligations. However, one positive outcome was heightened parental knowledge of educational processes and, in some contexts, strengthened communication between parents and teachers.

Effectiveness and engagement as a black box

In instances where students are able to access distance learning solutions to maintain the continuity of their learning, very little is known about the outcome of these solutions.⁵⁴ Engagement with TV and radio broadcasts is challenging to monitor and it is harder still to measure learning gains associated with these mostly one-directional technologies. Online platforms allow for greater data collection and, if carefully developed and implemented, can provide detailed information about learning progress – assuming that the data are available to researchers. Yet robust monitoring and measurement of gains from technology-dependent distance learning was and remains rare. There is also a growing body of

⁵⁰ UNESCO. 2020. UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures <http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/survey-education-covid-school-closures/>

⁵¹ Brookings. 2020. School closures, government responses, and learning inequality around the world during COVID-19. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/school-closures-government-responses-and-learning-inequality-around-the-world-during-covid-19/> (accessed 22 September 2020)

⁵² Demographic and Health Surveys. 2020. DHS StatCompiler. <https://www.statcompiler.com/en/> (accessed 22 September 2020)

⁵³ UN. 2020. [Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond](#). New York: UN

⁵⁴ UNESCO. 2020. [Distance learning strategies in response to COVID-19 school closures](#). Paris: UNESCO

evidence that sustaining student attention in purely digital platforms is more difficult than in face-to-face environments, a factor that may contribute to drop-off and fall-off from distance learning.⁵⁵

Education entails more than curricular study

The forced shift to distance learning convinced many educational stakeholders that technology (at least in its current iterations) cannot easily replace the experience of being in school with in-person interaction. Nor can technologies replace the teacher who remains central to the educational process. The pandemic has forced us to recognize that much of the learning that takes place in the physical and social space of schools – with others, through play, sports, art and extra-curricular activities – is not purely academic and probably poorly suited for remote delivery through technology. In other words, learning, as a human experience, remains to be rooted in social interaction and processes.⁵⁶ On the other hand, school lockdowns may have accelerated the acquisition of other skills and knowledge, such as deepened understandings of how to navigate complex software and conduct virtual meetings and other interactions.

New questions and concerns about technology dependence

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted society's reliance on technology, both in the realm of education and beyond it. On the positive side, students, teachers and families saw flickers of the ways digital learning might have the potential to make learning differentiated and personalized, and, in some cases, accommodate greater choice and autonomy. But the sudden shift to distance learning also forced families around the world to use technologies that they did not ask for and often did not choose, raising serious ethical issues. How is privacy assured? Who owns learning data? How is safety and decorum assured in virtual environments? While the pandemic has ushered in innovation, it has also brought new uncertainty to traditional understandings regarding locations of learning as well as public stewardship of education.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ UNESCO. 2020. UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures <http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/survey-education-covid-school-closures/>

⁵⁶ Dewey, John. 1899. *The School and Society*. University of Chicago Press (1915)

⁵⁷ Broadband Commission. 2020. *The digital transformation of education: Connecting schools, empowering learners*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374309/PDF/374309eng.pdf.multi>

Charting the way forward: Global cooperation for education in a post-COVID-19 world

A proposal to improve and strengthen the global mechanism for education cooperation

CONTEXT

With only ten years left to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and with the UN Secretary-General having launched the Decade of Action in September 2019, the year 2020 began with a renewed sense of commitment and urgency to accelerate progress towards meeting the SDGs. The year of acceleration, however, has been halted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated the inequalities in access to quality health care, education, decent work and social security. The pandemic has particularly exposed the collective vulnerabilities of the education sector and the inherent weaknesses in the existing global cooperation mechanism to deliver an immediate response and use resources more efficiently.

A coherent and coordinated governance mechanism that seamlessly links the global, regional and country levels is essential to ensure the effective harmonization of policy guidance and financing efforts, which must support national education and development efforts. The current global education landscape, however, is characterized by proliferation and fragmentation of education and development efforts. A range of international and regional players, with sometimes overlapping mandates and interventions, provide support to countries through multiple platforms and processes. Furthermore, in order to accelerate countries' progress toward SDG 4, global priorities need to be better aligned to countries' contexts and priorities, and duplication of efforts need to be eliminated and competition for funding and sub-sectoral interventions reduced.⁵⁸

Redefining the status and role of the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee

As per the Education 2030 Framework for Action adopted by more than 180 countries at the World Education Forum in 2015,⁵⁹ the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee is the legitimate global multi-stakeholder platform to ensure coordination and harmonization of efforts at all levels to achieve SDG 4 and other education-related SDG targets. Its mandate is to provide strategic guidance, review progress towards SDG 4 targets and commitments, monitor and advocate for adequate (strategic) financing and encourage harmonization and coordination of partner activities.⁶⁰ UNESCO serves as the Secretariat of the Steering Committee as part of its role to lead, coordinate and monitor the global education agenda, in accordance with the mandate entrusted to the Organization in the Framework.

There is a growing consensus that the effectiveness of the Steering Committee in guiding and influencing the course of policy, funding and action needs to be strengthened. In particular, the Steering Committee to date has been disconnected from international financing decisions made elsewhere and not sufficiently linked to the existing education sector coordination mechanisms at the regional and country levels. Today, the COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity for better cooperation, coordination and collaboration among education stakeholders; it has contributed to an unprecedented level of multilateral and multi-stakeholder joint advocacy, consultation and country support. The time is ripe, therefore, for reflecting upon and rethinking the governance of the SDG 4-

⁵⁸ Giannini, Stefania. 2019. [Bringing the international education community together](#). GEM blog (Posted on 9 December 2019).

⁵⁹ *ibid*

⁶⁰ UNESCO. 2016. [Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4](#). Paris: UNESCO

Education 2030 coordination mechanism, as we take the opportunity to reimagine post-COVID-19 education.

A roadmap to an improved mechanism for global education cooperation and coordination

Changing the narrative on education and development

Rethinking education and development approaches means reworking the narrative that responds to this changing reality, looking beyond school access and learning crisis that have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the critical role of education, skills development and research for the realization of the wider SDG ambition, it is important to keep in view the full scope of the SDG 4-Education 2030 agenda. Similarly, the international and development narratives must look beyond lower-income countries if they are to address the universally shared public policy and development challenges that the COVID-19 crisis has made starkly clear.

In this context, UNESCO proposes a reconfiguration of the global cooperation mechanism for education as defined by the Education 2030 Framework for Action.⁶¹ Following the extraordinary session of the Global Education Meeting (2020 GEM), UNESCO will lead a consultation in coordination with all relevant actors in order to propose an improved, effective global education cooperation mechanism that builds on the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee.

Building on the momentum

The proposal for an improved global education cooperation mechanism builds on the momentum and spirit of collaboration created by the current pandemic, which has compelled all partners to strengthen synergies and efficiencies in response to the crisis. There are promising examples of collaboration for awareness raising and joint action around the education crisis. UNESCO led the drafting of the UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief "Education during COVID-19 and beyond", which contains inputs from 15 organizations. The "Save our Future" campaign is rallying donors, civil society organizations and youth into jointly protecting education. Policy guidance was jointly developed (e.g. joint policy framework on the reopening of schools by UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP and World Bank), and donors and implementing agencies collaborated to support COVID-19 country response (e.g. GPE's and ECW's accelerated and crisis funding windows). Furthermore, given that COVID-19 is fundamentally a health crisis, there has been increased inter-sectoral cooperation, strengthening the vital linkages between education, health, nutrition and social welfare, for example, through strengthened collaboration with WFP and WHO. New types of partnerships have also emerged. UNESCO established the Global Education Coalition (GEC) which gathers more than 150 members, including multilaterals, regional organizations, development banks and public and private partners. The GEC offers an innovative framework for intervention, mobilizing non-traditional partners with both financial and in-kind contributions to collectively advance thematic priorities in COVID-19 recovery efforts.

Connecting the dots

Global education partners have increasingly demonstrated their capacity and desire to improve coordination and efficiency in response to the current crisis. Yet the renewed enthusiasm for global cooperation in education must go beyond the coordination of short-term COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. The mechanism must be efficient and effective, but also a credible, accountable and sustainable platform that connects the political, technical and financial commitments to achieve SDG 4-Education 2030 on the one hand, and the global, regional and national discourses and action,

⁶¹ Ibid.

on the other. These diverse processes and structures will then be able to provide more coherent and effective policy guidance, financing flows and actions to support national education development.⁶²

A credible and accountable mechanism must also start from the basic understanding that it is countries that must ultimately benefit from effective global education cooperation and coordination. Thus, the global approach must be informed and guided by national realities and policy priorities. Only by starting from the country level will collective global education efforts influence and impact change on the ground. This is in line with the UN development system reform to foster the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which aims to bring UN presence and action closer to local needs and contexts.

Building on and strengthening the existing coordination mechanism (i.e. the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee), the renewed architecture should bring added value at the regional and country levels, an overall vision of sustainable development, cross-sectoral synergies, and a seamless humanitarian-development nexus. For this to happen, it is important to harmonize it with the governance and coordination mechanisms put in place by the reform of the UN development system, and, particularly, the UN Country Teams, which are now focused on a single strategic framework for development assistance and are led by an impartial, independent and empowered Resident Coordinator. This is very much in line with the spirit of the Education 2030 Framework for Action (Article 90).

The improved cooperation mechanism should be anchored in a set of key principles:

- country-centred global education cooperation;
- greater simplification and efficiency;
- better linking of policy steering with finance;
- greater accountability through more robust data and evidence;
- a shared sense of collective responsibility.

Moreover, this improved mechanism will simplify the “global education architecture” and bring increased clarity and transparency to the different levels and areas of engagement and interactions of partners and actors. Such a mechanism may consist of three components:

- 1) **Political**: is at the heart of the strengthened SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, linked to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and supported by the SDG 4-Education 2030 co-convening and other multilateral agencies as well as regional organizations.
- 2) **Finance**: to mobilize increased financing for education in line with the policy agenda set by the Steering Committee and in line with country priorities; and to achieve greater harmonization, equity and effectiveness of international funding.
- 3) **Technical**: to provide data, analysis and knowledge products for the Steering Committee’s deliberations.

As mentioned above, the linkage between the global coordination mechanism and the regional coordination platforms and country-level coordination mechanisms will need to be strengthened, as the latter both inform and are guided by global policy directions and financial priorities.

Following the 2020 GEM, UNESCO will convene a broad, representative working group and lead a consultation process in the following six months with relevant stakeholders and actors, with a view to presenting a proposed global education cooperation mechanism at the next ordinary session of the Global Education Meeting in 2021.

⁶² The Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2016) states that the global coordination mechanism is to be reviewed and adapted as necessary, at the Global Education Meetings (Article 95).