COVID-19 impact on schools and children's education – why learning must go on

Schools in 191 countries closed, school-population of 1,6 billion affected (91% of students worldwide), risks that education is low on the radar of COVID-related short-, mid- and long-term planning and funding of international cooperation actors.

A disruption in schooling has short, medium and long-term risks for the development, well-being, protection, future prospects of children and lasting consequences for social and economic recovery, people's resilience and sustainable development. Education cannot wait until crises are over. The time to support education is now !

No education has immediate effects: increase in school-drop out of vulnerable, girls, conflict-affected and displaced; fallback in learning, lost school years, missed exams and class-repetition; increase in child protection concerns such as violence, abuse, early marriage, mental distress; increase in health-concerns such as hygiene, illness, nutrition etc. and **longer-term effects** such as increased inequalities and social divide, young generations without basic skills and competencies for life, work and further education prospects (lost generations), reduced resilience of people and society, economic repercussions. #LNOB & #SDG4 at risk.

Why children's education and learning must go on during and in the aftermath of COVID-19 confinement:

- Avoids fallback in educational-pathway and future prospects: those who continue learning are more likely to progress in the subject matters and exam preparation and are less likely to repeat classes or even drop out of school.
- Helps reduce inequalities: educational disruptions disproportionally affect the most disadvantaged – it is a matter of social inclusion and of leaving no one behind.
- Imparts lifesaving and life-sustaining knowledge and skills: addressing measures for healthy practices and safe individual and social behaviour in children's learning-content – benefitting both children and their families.
- Affords protection and supports social reconstruction: those who continue learning are less likely to engage in unsafe and risky behaviour and more likely to return to school once they reopen; keeping touch with peers and teachers is both a preventive measure in case of potential domestic violence and helps create a sense of social belonging during isolation.
- It supports mental health and well-being: learning instils a sense of normalcy, it provides structure in otherwise chaotic and uncertain times filled with anxiety, and helps cope with potential psychological impact.
- It is critical for economic recovery, health, peace and stability: we cannot afford lost generations and opportunities for learning translating into lost future earnings for individuals and societies during an expected global post-COVID-19 recession! There is enough evidence that the quality of a country's education system and the number of completed quality school years are interrelated with positive economic growth, health-outcomes, mortality and likelihood of violence.

Read on the next page how to ensure children's learning does not end while schools are closed.

COVID-19 Impact on education, challenges and solutions

EducationCovid-19

A summary of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, common challenges and potential solutions drawing on SDC country offices' and partners' experience from Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Chad, Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Moldova, Niger, occupied Palestinian territories, Syria and the West Africa region.

IMPACTS

- Nation-wide **school closures** have affected all education levels, most heavily affected are learners at pre-primary, primary and secondary level basic education.
- Risk of **fallbacks in education pathway** is particularly high for mandatory education, and for the most vulnerable children (girls, refugee and IDP, marginalised children and young people).
- **Food security** has been impacted where school meals were the only daily meal for children.
- The lack of physical activity, socialising and interacting with peers impact the **physical and mental health and well-being** of children and young people.
- Crises increase the risks of **child protection issues** such as violence, abuse, child marriage and child labour.
- The COVID-19 crisis increases **pre-existing vulnerabilities**, in particular for girls, refugee and displaced children, children with disabilities and the most marginalised.

CHALLENGES

- **Lack of preparedness** of the education sector is commonly acknowledged across countries. Distance learning, education in emergencies (EiE) and preparedness were often not included in national education sector plans leading to a slow response from Ministries of Education (MoE) and the **lack of standardisation** of the modalities and content of distance learning.
- In countries already affected by a crisis, EiE programmes were not necessarily tailored to quickly **scale up** to respond to a pandemic crisis.
- The **fragility of education systems pre-crisis** is further undermined by the COVID-19 crisis and impacts the ability of the education sector to respond to education needs.
- **Poor infrastructure**, including low internet connectivity, poor mobile phone coverage and frequent electricity cuts, impacts access to distance learning.
- **Access** is also an issue for distributing printed learning materials, either due to ongoing conflict or social distancing measures.
- The **lack of teacher training** on education in emergencies and distance learning affects the **quality of distance teaching**. The quality depends on the adaptability of teachers and their familiarity with distance learning tools and available channels of communication.

- Teachers face difficulties in **engaging students** in distance learning, particularly young children.
- **Parents** also face multiple difficulties supporting their children with distance learning, due to their socio-economic situation, education level, access to online learning.

SOLUTIONS

- The reactivity and adaptability of MoEs, education authorities and teachers translate into the rapid set up of **blended distance learning** using existing and local channels.
- The shift to online learning opens the door to **innovation** and increased use of new technologies in education.
- The COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity to develop **new partnerships with the private sector** to set up online learning platforms, strengthen internet access and increase mobile phone coverage.
- **TV and radio programmes** are an efficient distance learning medium in low tech environments, reaching out to students in rural areas and enabling the translation of content into local languages or adding subtitles.
- **Teachers** play a crucial role in ensuring the continuation of education and checking in on their students to make sure they don't fall behind.
- **Planning for the reopening of schools** must include catch-up classes, accelerated learning programmes, adaptation of the school and exams calendar to leave no one behind and **stronger collaboration across sectors**, in particular WASH, health and child protection to ensure safe learning environments.
- Setting up **alternative options to school meals**, such as cash and voucher assistance, is crucial to avoid a nutrition crisis.
- The crisis is an opportunity to **build back better**, to collect lessons learned, **develop comprehensive preparedness plans** and **invest in teacher training** in education in emergencies, psychosocial support and distance learning.

COVID-19 related school closure: Response Guidelines

EducationCovid-19

Act local

- **Follow** national policy guidance on health & school closures; follow the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Humanitarian COVID-response plan on continuity of learning!
- **Plan** aligned with national response plans & standards, collaborate with MoE & local actors; consider contextual realities, limited infrastructure, services, resources!
- **Build** on **and** support local action, community-based innovation and solutions that ensure learning can continue in safety for learners and teachers! Be creative!
- **Coordinate** with the national/local Education Cluster or other country-level coordination mechanisms and donor agencies!
- **Advocate** for LNOB & support the most vulnerable, ensure the crisis does not widen the digital and learning divide; online learning is not the only solution!

Think global

- **Tap into** the SDC Education Fund "Innovation meets Education" to support your COVID-response!
- **Capitalise on** EiE good practice, adhere to INEE Minimum Standards and contribute to Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19!
- **Take advantage** of SDC's global partnerships and board-seats at GPE, Education Cannot Wait, INEE, UNICEF, UNHCR to leverage action at country-level!
- **Check** the SDC Education Network's dedicated COVID-19 site on Shareweb for resources, tools and network activities – share your knowledge, become a member!

Immediate EiE response: during school closures

1. Ensure continued, inclusive and safe learning:

- **Distance** learning via locally available channels high/low/no-tech: ICT, internet, email, mobile phone, Whatsapp, social media, TV, radio, telephone trees, books and print, regular mail, family learning circles
- **Learning content** and curriculum adjusted to distance learning and including social-emotional learning issues (SEL) and COVID-19-related health education, translated in local languages, consider gender, age, and other diversity factors (LNOB!)
- **Teacher** training on adjusted learning content with distance coaching and peer support; continued salary payment; parents supported in helping learners with distance assignments
- **Learning material** distributed also to vulnerable, marginalised and displaced (LNOB!)

2. Incorporate measures for child protection, physical & mental health and well-being:

- **Emergency-relevant protective teaching & learning**: psychosocial support activities (PSS), crisis-specific child protection risks, communication on pandemic, health/hygiene practice, addressed in distance-learning content, sensitisation of children, parents and teacher training

3. Use potential new modalities, work across sectors, monitor and prepare re-opening:

- **Innovative modalities** to support EiE response, children's learning and well-being (e.g. private sector for ICT-distance-solutions; cash-transfer instead of school meals); collaboration across sectors for complementary action (e.g. nutrition, wash, health, livelihood, protection)
- **Monitor** learning, health, protection situation and adjust if necessary, coordinate
- **Prepare** measures for reopening of schools, adjusted school-calendar, exam-dates, school-based health, safety and protection

Medium-term EiE & recovery/resilience action: once schools reopen

4. Support reopening of schools and healthy and safe learning environments:

- **WASH** facilities and hygiene products available for both sexes, teacher training on pandemic-related hygiene-protocol, mitigation and prevention measures, student sensitisation, health clubs, school canteens
- **School materials** for marginalised areas, vulnerable/displaced children (LNOB!)
- **Protection** measures to keep schools free from violence, e.g. risk reduction plans

5. Ensure all children resume and progress in schooling:

- **Catch-up classes** or remedial programmes for those who lag behind during school closure or compressed curricula to enable cohort grade promotion; accelerated education for school-drop outs or those never enrolled (LNOB!)
- **Exam** preparation support, potential curriculum and exam adjustment
- **Social protection** actions incl. cash transfer, vouchers, cross-sectoral action, economic-empowerment of vulnerable families to avoid school-drop out and ensure education inclusion of marginalised, displaced children (LNOB!)

6. Build back better – enhance quality of teaching and learning:

- **Educational authorities and teacher** professional development including on digitalisation, ICT, mobile and distance learning; PSS/SEL; WASH & health education; social cohesion, Education in Emergencies

7. Build back better – innovation and crisis-resilient education systems:

- **Institutionalisation** of prevention/preparedness measures, crisis-resilient policies & planning; ICT and new partnerships (e.g. with private sector)