Save the Children's written submission to the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education

June 2020

Save the Children's following submission is to contribute to the report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the enjoyment of human rights.

With Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), the global community committed to realising the right to quality education for all children and adolescents by 2030. With school closures nationwide in 191 countries, COVID-19 crisis puts this promise into jeopardy more than ever before

90 percent of the world's existing student population have had their education disrupted, affecting 1.54 billion children, including 743 million girls. As of 27 May 2020, over 1 billion previously enrolled children remain out of school, with many more affected by closures. While some school systems are tentatively, and often partially, reopening, the cumulative impact on children's learning, wellbeing - and their futures - is increasing daily.

The scale of the learning loss will already be huge. Regular school closures during summer holidays can result in losses of 10-25 percent of annual learning[1], and estimates predict that children currently out of school will lose $11 trillion in future earnings from the learning loss of just four months of school closures alone[2]. Learning losses will not fall evenly, with school closures affecting children from poorer households disproportionately[3].

The impacts of school closures will be felt long after schools reopen. While schools are closed, children will miss out on crucial nutrition from school meals, and be more vulnerable to illnesses and child protection risks such as physical and humiliating punishment, sexual and gender-based violence, child marriage, child labour, child trafficking and recruitment and use in armed conflict.

The longer schools are closed, the less likely they are to return to school once they reopen – and those who do return are at greater risk of dropping out. Girls, children with disabilities and children already affected by conflict or displacement are particularly affected. The Ebola crisis saw a 65 percent increase in teenage pregnancy in some communities while schools were closed[4], and early estimates predict that 10 million more girls will be out of school than before the pandemic once all schools reopen.[5]

[1] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/00346543066003227
[2] https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2020/04/29/the-covid-19-cost-of-school-closures/?preview_id=802677
[3] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/0034654313483906
[4] https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-school-closures-around-world-will-hit-girls-hardest
[5] Girls' Education and COVID-19

Keeping Learning Alive During Lockdown

Distance learning can mitigate some of the impact of school closures and keep learning - and the right to education - alive while schools are closed. Governments and school systems across the world have rapidly developed and rolled out educational programming online, through TV, radio, and with at-home printed materials, with the full range of global responses tracked online here.

Distance learning resources have a key role to play in supporting children's Mental Health and well-being, engaging children and families with public health and WASH messaging, and helping them protect themselves, their families and communities during the pandemic.

But with many distance learning resources requiring technology, uneven provision and unequal access to these delivery channels means there is a huge risk of excluding poorer and marginalised children from lifesaving messages and realising the right to education, and exacerbating the unequal impacts of learning losses during school closures.

Indeed, education leaders surveyed in 75 countries report that availability of technological infrastructure is the most challenging issue in the implementation of their COVID response.

While three-quarters of the population in sub-Saharan Africa have SIM connection, only 44 percent have a subscription to a mobile carrier. For those who have a phone, only a third have a smartphone; the rest have more basic phones with limited ability to access many of the available educational resources.

And children's access to the internet can be even more limited. In many countries, including Turkey, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, Thailand, Peru, and Indonesia, 50 percent or fewer children from disadvantaged schools have a computer at home.

In sub-Saharan Africa, 89 per cent of learners do not have access to household computers, 82 percent lack internet access and around 28 million learners live in locations not served by mobile networks.[6]

Even among highly-resourced countries—like Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom— the absence of connectivity has meant an unequal shift to distance learning during COVID-19 for families and continues to be a major challenge for universal access.

Internet access is particularly limited for children from marginalised groups. In Ethiopia, 81 percent of rural children have never used the internet, compared to 70 percent of children in urban areas[7]. Girls will also often face greater barriers: in India, 70 percent of rural boys have never used the internet, compared to 89 percent of girls.[8]

"Low-technology" delivery modalities such as radio and TV can and do reach a much larger number of children than the internet in most contexts; in Ethiopia, Save the Children has secured the use of 8 television channels that will reach approximately 8 million children with learning materials that we are developing with UNICEF.

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[6] https://www.france24.com/en/20200421-half-of-world-s-locked-down-pupils-lack-computer-un

[7] https://www.younglives.org.uk/content/access-digital-learning-during-covid-19-closures-compounding-educational-inequality

[8] https://www.younglives.org.uk/content/access-digital-learning-during-covid-19-closures-compounding-educational-inequality

But while the positive impact of radio learning is well documented,[9] including for Early Childhood Development[10], access to radio is far from universal: in low and lower-middle-income countries more than 40 percent of all households do not own radios or televisions. In Rwanda and Kenya, Save the Children is using "Viamo", a low-tech voice-to-text phone application to enable two way interaction between parents, children and program implementers and to deliver parenting messages where Radio and TV are not an option.

Radio and TV access is often even lower for displaced and crisis affected communities. In Afghanistan, poor access to broadcasting and radio waves, sometimes blocked by armed opposition groups, and lack of awareness prohibits boys and girls from widely accessing publicly available distance learning resources.

The positive impact of the simplest technology – printed materials and open-ended toys – can have on learning continuity during periods of school closure are well researched and should form a core part of the response. For example, a US-based intervention that mailed 10 books to students over the summer matched to students reading interests, accompanied by email or text messages to parents, promoted more than one month of gains in reading skills. And the use of at home materials alongside audio or video content, whether broadcast on radio, TV or the internet, is even more effective. In many crisis-affected contexts and the most marginalised communities, where access to technology is limited and the cost to distribute hardware prohibitive, paper-based distance learning is sometimes the only way to reach out-of-school girls and boys.

And a growing body of research shows that parents and siblings have significant effects on childhood learning. Save the Children's Early Literacy and Math at Home and Literacy Boost programmes, alongside other family-based literacy interventions, show that even in the poorest households and households with limited literacy, parental and sibling engagement and support can add significantly to learning outcomes using very simple methods, such as parents or older siblings reading to younger children – where parents are given the necessary resources and guidance.

Governments must, therefore, ensure inclusion is the overriding priority in their distance learning strategies, and prioritise the most accessible, 'low-or-no-tech' approaches if efforts to maintain the right to education are to be equitable and not exclusive. Given the huge variety in access to both technical equipment as well as connectivity and the diversity of the population, governments must use different platforms and methodologies to ensure that they reach all children, including children with disabilities and children using minority languages.

They must provide and build upon programmes to rapidly expand access to learning materials, including distribution of devices such as radios or laptops, or of services such as internet access and mobile data, as well as resources that parents can use to support learning at home.

Rapid monitoring and assessment systems should be put in place to support access to data in real time to inform decision making. For example, In Rwanda, Save the Children alongside other partners has committed to support The Rwanda Education Board in collecting weekly monitoring and assessment of remote learning data on common indicators which feeds into discussions and decisions from weekly COVID19 Education Response coordination meetings.

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[9] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322355675_Radio_as_an_Educational_Tool_in_Developing_Countries_Its_Evolution_and_Current_Usages -

[10] https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_90450.html

All around the world, teachers have taken on this new challenge of providing remote learning to children to their best abilities, often facing the same challenges as their students with regards to access to and knowledge of tools and connectivity, and with limited guidance or support from existing material and infrastructure. It is crucial that teachers are central to the development of educational approaches for remote learning.

These approaches must build on existing standards and processes including:

- Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE] Mimimum Standards for Education
- INEE Learning Must Go On: Recommendations for keeping children safe and learning, during and after the COVID-19 crisis
- INEE Background Paper on Psychosocial Support and Social and Emotional Learning for Children and Youth in Emergency Settings,
- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action Child Protection Minimum Standards
- The Principles for Digital Development.

Finally, governments must not only keep education alive during lockdown for the learning and wellbeing of children, but they must keep children and families engaged with education systems, the value of education, and the awareness of school reopening to minimise the risks for child labour or early marriage, maximise the chances of their return when schools reopen.

Planning now for a safe, inclusive Return to Learning

As governments prepare to reopen schools and other places of learning, ministries and school communities must work with health ministries to minimise the risk of transmission of COVID-19 within learning spaces to protect children, their families and communities, with investment in WASH facilities in schools which do not already have adequate provision in order to help prevent further COVID-19 outbreaks, as well as keeping children safe beyond the current crisis. Planning safe school reopening requires multi-sectoral engagement.

We also know from the Ebola crisis that it is crucial that governments start planning as soon as possible to protect the right to education and address the learning inequalities created and exacerbated by COVID-19 school closures, particularly for girls and other marginalised groups who we know are at greater risk of not returning to school.

Stakeholders must together identify and address the holistic needs of children as they are supported to return to school – including remedial or catch-up classes to make up for the lost learning and to support children's transition from home-based learning , as well as Mental Health and Psychosocial Support. Children's wellbeing – both physical and mental – must be prioritised given the time spent out of school and the wider effects of the COVID-19 crisis on children's families, communities, and support system.

To do so and to protect children's safety as well as that of their families, friends and communities, and support the return to school of all children, governments and school systems should use the new Inter-Agency Safe Back to School Practitioner's Guide.   The Guide provides an integrated, participatory process for safe school reopening applicable in all contexts across the humanitarian-development nexus, building on the UN Framework for Reopening Schools, and provides concrete actions that can be taken to operationalise these global policy recommendations.

The guide was developed with reference to the INEE Minimum Standards, the Child Protection Minimum Standards, the Sphere Handbook, and the Guidance for the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 in schools (IFRC, UNICEF, WHO).

Build Back Better

The school reopening process offers a unique multi-sectoral opportunity for governments and school communities to build back better, address gender inequalities and strengthen the resilience of the education system. An inclusive, participatory process can help bring all children and young people into school and leave no one behind. The strong link between the home and school as well as the recognition of role of parents as active promoters of learning and as the first teachers of children should be continued even beyond this crisis.

Lessons learned from the COVID-19 school closures must inform disaster and emergency preparedness for future outbreaks of COVID-19 alongside other contextually specific hazards that might further jeopardize children's rights to learn, be protected and survive.

Governments must improve education information and data management to build evidence-based re-enrollment drives. Timely, accurate, and appropriate education data is a key foundation of an effective education system. Tracking re-enrollment and attendance is going to be a significant component of ensuring an Inclusive Return to Learning, especially when addressing the needs of marginalised groups in emergency and conflict affected settings.

Distance learning programmes created or expanded during school closures should be maintained and scaled up so that those children who cannot return to school can continue to benefit from them, and so that they are ready to use in the event of further school closures.

School systems and teachers need to be supported to address increased Mental Health and Psychosocial Support needs, catch-up or remedial education, and where children can only intermittently attend school, blended learning approaches.

But the need to secure greater funding to maintain the right to education during this crisis is even more critical. This requires increased investment in education systems, and new investment to support alternative forms of distance education, investment in teacher training and innovative, accessible technology. Critically, governments must maintain and increase domestic spending on education, and maintain the role of teachers throughout and beyond lockdown.

Governments and partners must ensure education, including community-based and non-formal models, is included in national strategic response planning and budgeting processes and secure education – and the school health measures required for safe school reopening - as a key sector or pillar within the response at country-level.

Bilateral and multilateral donors including Education Cannot Wait, the Global Partnership for Education and the World Bank should continue to commit to strengthening the COVID-19 education response, including aligning to gaps identified in the COVID-19 Humanitarian Response Plan. Bilateral donors should top-up existing support to these multilateral funds and ensure that application and approval processes are aligned in order to reduce the burden on stretched country teams.

Donors should reduce, or be flexible in, donor compliance and risk burden for implementing agencies to ensure rapid response during this unprecedented crisis.

Donors should meet their commitments to localisation, ensuring that local and national organisations are funded to respond to the crisis – recognising their local expertise and ability to reach marginalised populations, particularly given global travel restrictions.