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COVID-19 and the Education Emergency

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Policy Brief (ENGLISH): COVID-19 AND THE GLOBAL EDUCATION EMERGENCY: PLANNING SYSTEMS FOR RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

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COVID-19 MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO COMPLEX PROBLEMS

COVID-19 AND THE GLOBAL EDUCATION EMERGENCY: PLANNING SYSTEMS FOR RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

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Abstract

COVID-19 caused the largest education disruption in history. It exposed the scale to which education systems were unprepared for crises. Country-wide school closures were a near universal policy response deemed necessary in the first phase. However, they have serious negative effects and deepen inequities. The G20 countries face dual challenges. They must respond domestically and, some, as OECD DAC donors. This brief recommends crisis-sensitive educational planning with a strong equity focus to ensure education continuity, predicated on comprehensive health measures. It suggests actions for the G20 countries and donors to rebuild and support resilient education systems, moving from first response to recovery.

Challenge

COVID-19 has caused the largest mass disruption of education in history affecting a generation. At its peak in April 2020, more than 190 countries instituted country-wide closures, resulting in 90% of learners (over 1.5 billion) out of both school and education institutions (UNESCO 2020a).[1] Over 100 million learners were affected by localized closures in six countries.[2] Additionally, 258 million children were already out-of-school —30% were affected by conflict and emergency, and the remaining, due to entrenched inequities (ODI 2016; UIS 2019), which will be exacerbated by the pandemic.

The Group of Twenty (G20) countries face dual challenges. All must respond domestically; nevertheless, their responses will have regional and global impacts given their influence as G20 members. G20 members that are Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors must also support education through sustained financing and international cooperation and assistance. However, the societal and education conditions of the G20 countries are varied. The impact of the pandemic will be differential.

This policy brief recommends actions for crisis-sensitive educational policy planning and finance as countries move from first response to recovery to build more resilient education systems. It outlines general principles that should be contextually applied according to the domestic circumstances of

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[1] Data on country-wide closures encompass enrolment figures at pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary levels from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) database for countries that mandated country-wide closures.

[2] Localized school closures were instituted in Australia, Iceland, Russia, Seychelles, Sweden, and the US.

the G20 countries as they entered the pandemic as well as its differential effects within countries and on specific groups.[3] The principles should also be considered by donors as they engage in international cooperation and assistance in education.

Country-wide school closures were a near universal policy response as part of a package of emergency measures deemed necessary in the first phase. However, evidence on disrupted access generally and during emergencies (UNESCO 2018), along with the experiences of school closures during the Ebola virus and the influenza pandemic (Elston et al. 2017; Hallgarten 2020; Viner et al. 2020), indicate negative short- and long-term effects. These include learning loss, drop-out, physical and sexual abuse and gender-based violence, increased under-age pregnancies, aggravated mental health and psycho-social impacts, and reduced outlets for emotional support and peer relationships.

Additionally, schools are hubs for essential ancillary services including food and nutrition, health and psycho-social support, and therapeutic and diagnostic counselling. The World Food Programme (WFP 2020) estimates 352 million children went without school meals due to COVID-19 closures.[4] This, and other services, are most often accessed by vulnerable groups and families in special

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Education in all its forms and at all levels shall exhibit the following interrelated and essential features:
(a) *Availability* - functioning educational institutions and programs to be available in sufficient quantity within the jurisdiction of the State party
(b) *Accessibility* - be accessible to everyone, without discrimination, within the jurisdiction of the State party. Three overlapping dimensions:
  i.   Non-discrimination
  ii. Physical accessibility - within safe physical reach or via modern technology
  iii. Economic accessibility - whereas primary education shall be available 'free to all', State parties are required to progressively introduce free secondary and higher education;
(c) *Acceptability* - the form and substance of education, including curricula and teaching methods, have to be acceptable to students and parents
(d) *Adaptability* - flexible so it can adapt to the needs of changing societies and communities and respond to the needs of students within their diverse social and cultural settings

Box 1 State obligations concerning the right to education
Source: UN ECOSOC, 1999

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circumstances.

Regular formal schooling also provides the offshoot benefit of childcare, particularly in the elementary years. Although not its primary intention, this particular role of schooling has been laid bare by the pandemic. In addition to independent formal provision of preschool and childcare, early childhood care and education may also be affiliated with or provided directly by schools (Urban, Cardini, and Romero 2018). These functions enable a substantial proportion of working populations to engage in productive labor, also enhancing women's economic participation (UN Women 2015). Finally, there are obvious economic incentives to reopening schools, heightened in countries with larger informal economies, restricted social safety nets, and larger shares of people in poverty.

Clinical understandings on transmission and on the evolution of the virus are developing (Qiu et al. 2020; Sun et al. 2020; WHO 2020). Sustainable reopening of schools must be predicated on sustained control of the virus, comprehensive public health measures, and placing the well-being of the child at

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[3] Space does not permit country-level analysis. The brief recommends applying the general principles to domestic contexts. An early example is the application to Ontario, Canada. See Srivastava (2020).
[4] This figure is based on 172 countries with school closures.

the center in view of aggravated risk and protection issues (Allen et al. 2020; Global Health Governance Programme 2020; Jones et al. 2020; Laurent, Wilson, and Allen 2020), to mitigate further educational and societal disruption (Sridhar and Hassan 2020; UN 2020).

While the pandemic interrupted regular formal provision of education, the unalienable right to education remains. States are the principal duty-bearers under international human rights law to respect, protect, and fulfil the right to education (Box 1; UN ECOSOC 1999; UNESCO n.d.). The crisis highlights the centrality of these obligations. As countries enter the pandemic, their ability to enact the obligations will be affected by capacity, supply, and financing issues that characterize education systems, new pandemic-related compulsions, and the level of crisis preparedness systems in place (UNESCO-IIEP and GPE 2015). This brief provides recommendations for G20 countries and donors for sustained action to rebuild and support more resilient education systems for long-term recovery.

Proposal

1. Institutionalize an integrated crisis-sensitive planning approach for immediate, medium-, and long-term education response and recovery. Extend cross-sectoral approaches prioritizing vulnerable groups.

Framework for Reopening Schools (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, WFP)
Planning considerations for prior to reopening; as part of reopening process; once schools reopen. Four pillars: ensure safe operations, learning, including the most marginalized, and wellbeing and protection.

Interim Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools (UNICEF, WHO, IFRC)
Key messages, actions, and checklists for safe school operations. Addresses different members of the school community: schools administrators, teachers, staff; parents/caregivers and community members; students and children.

Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards for Education: preparedness, response recovery
Tool for governments to enhance the quality of education preparedness, response and recovery, increase access to safe and relevant learning opportunities, and ensure accountability in providing these services.

INEE Coronavirus Resources Portal
Resources to support education provision in view of COVID-19. Includes technical note, advocacy messages, webinar and blog series on technical support for working in already complex and challenging contexts.

Box 2 Touchstone documents and resources

The pandemic will exacerbate existing inequities in education in all countries with further implications for low-resource and crisis contexts (Elston et al. 2017; Hallgarten 2020; Viner et al. 2020; Giannini and Albrectsen 2020; World Bank 2020). An integrated crisis-sensitive approach to educational policy and planning should cover response, recovery, and prevention. It is vital to ensuring the needs of all learners, prioritizing vulnerable groups. This involves four key considerations: (i) managing a crisis and instituting first responses; (ii) planning for (interrupted) reopening with appropriate measures; (iii) sustained crisis-sensitive planning; and (iv) adjusting existing policies and strengthening policy dialogue. Box 2 presents touchstone documents and resources for guidance (INEE 2010, 2020a; UNESCO et al. 2020; UNICEF, WHO, and IFRC 2020).[5] In particular, the *Framework for Reopening Schools* outlines planning considerations to be used prior to reopening, as part of the reopening process, and once schools are reopened (UNESCO et al. 2020). It

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[5] Access contextualized standards resources here: https://inee.org/collections/inee-minimum-standards-contextualizations

rests on four pillars: ensuring safe operations, learning, including the most marginalized, and wellbeing and protection.

i. Managing a crisis – first responses. First responses must be quick, coordinated, and cross-sectoral to sustain education service delivery. Education authorities should set priorities and engage all relevant stakeholders,[6] creating a short-term plan based on rapid situation analyses and needs assessments, which is integrated with medium- and longer-term plans. Existing crisis preparedness and planning will determine agility and comprehensiveness. The *INEE Minimum Standards for Education* is a tool for governments to enhance the quality of preparedness, response, and recovery (INEE 2010).

Responses should ensure that education and allied services continue, while prioritizing vulnerable groups. Assessments of child protection risks and the communities in which they live are crucial. This will likely involve alternative cross-sectoral planning and delivery (e.g., education; health; child, women, and social welfare, etc.).

Creating a cross-sectoral task force or planning body to coordinate expertise will enable a more sustainable approach. It can also broadly disseminate health and education data and information transparently through open data strategies. It can also facilitate decision-making, which if not consensual, is well-informed and substantiated. At minimum, members from a range of relevant health and education areas should be included (e.g., educational planning, teaching and pedagogy; educational administration and leadership; epidemiology; public health; mental health; biostatistics; and sanitation). This body should contribute to all levels of education governance from national to local levels, with explicit linking between local education and health authorities. It should be retained from first response throughout reopening and recovery. This is critical for all countries, and particularly cogent for those without a national department or ministry of education.

ii. Planning for (interrupted) reopening with appropriate measures. Education systems must be fully prepared to reopen education institutions when appropriate. Preparation for reopening can take
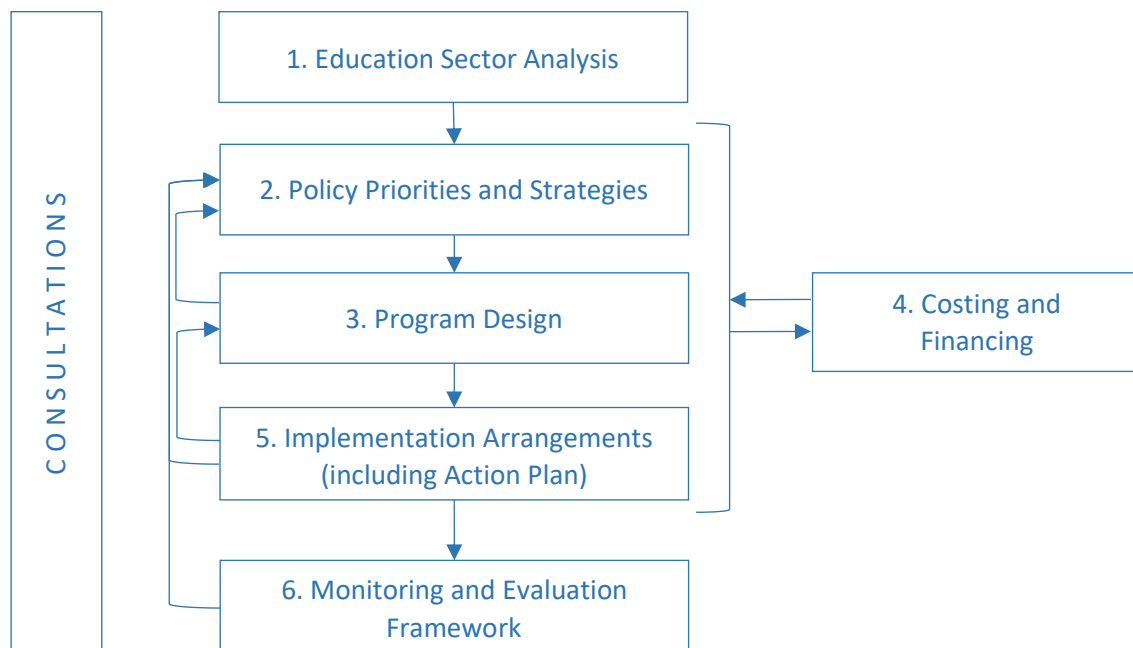

Figure 1. Main components of educational planning – a framework

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[6] For a practitioner-oriented overview of education response during the pandemic aligned with phases of response, see INEE (2020b)

several weeks or months, where different phases of the regular planning cycle are compressed. These include education sector and context analysis; formulating policy priorities and strategies; program design; costing and financing; implementing decisions and an action plan informed by data; and designing monitoring and evaluation frameworks (see Figure 1, which has been adapted from UNESCO-IIEP and Global Partnership for Education).[7]

Reopening will unlikely be a one-time event or follow a one-size-fits-all approach, even within the same country, region, or community. It is predicated on sustained control of the virus to manageable levels, safe conditions, and comprehensive public health measures (Allen et al. 2020; Global Health Governance Programme 2020). Consensus is developing around the role of testing, contact tracing, quarantining and isolation, physical distancing, robust sanitation measures, mask-wearing, appropriate ventilation, and use of outdoor space, among others (Jones et al. 2020; Panovska-Griffiths et al. 2020; UNICEF et al. 2020).

A phased and localized approach (e.g., levels of education, years, locations) is recommended. There should be a continuous community-based risk assessment of the health and safety contexts, linking local health data on community transmission with education data (Allen et al. 2020). This will have implications on ascertaining which communities can sustain school reopening, procedural management, and practical considerations to implement measures, given their education system capacity, infrastructure, and teaching and educational personnel supply.

iii. Sustained crisis-sensitive planning. The impact of the pandemic on education is severe, in part, because very few systems were prepared for crises. Education systems are more resilient when preparatory measures are in place. Going forward, managing the COVID-19 education emergency should be a sustained part of broader crisis-sensitive planning exercises (IIEP-UNESCO 2018). Box 3 presents examples from two countries that were able to mobilize planning experiences and structures from prior emergencies to address education delivery in view of the pandemic.

Education can play a key role in preparing for risks and building resilient systems. Furthermore, integrating risk reduction and risk management within the curriculum (UNISDR and GADRRRES 2017), ensuring that information and materials are inclusive and accessible (GFDRR 2018), and gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive planning in emergencies are vital (INEE and UNGEI 2019). These are significant as countries move toward recovery, particularly since the negative effects of the pandemic are likely to be more severe on vulnerable groups and girls and women (Elston et al. 2017; Giannini and Albrectsen 2020, Hallgarten 2020; Viner et al. 2020).

> "Crisis-sensitive planning in education involves identifying and analyzing existing risks of conflict and natural hazards and understanding the two-way interaction between these risks and education to develop strategies that respond appropriately. It aims to contribute to minimizing the negative impacts of risk on education service delivery and to maximize the positive impacts of education policies and programming on preventing conflict and disaster or mitigating their effects. It also requires identifying and overcoming patterns of inequity and exclusion in education" –IIEP UNESCO

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[7] Figure 1 adapted from UNESCO-IIEP and Global Partnership for Education, 2015.

> **The added-value of crisis-sensitive educational planning**
> Jordan and Burkina Faso are pertinent examples. An unexpected situation in Jordan —a high influx of Syrian refugees— prompted the Ministry of Education to act quickly and find learning solutions for all. By integrating lessons learned into its longer-term planning, the Ministry adapted and prepared the system for eventual future crises. This longer-term perspective showed benefits in the pandemic response. The Ministry has been able to respond to COVID-19 effectively by providing learning solutions and catch-up programs. Similarly, the Technical Secretariat for Education in Emergencies in Burkina Faso, originally created to respond to displaced populations, is leading the COVID-19 response in basic and non-formal education.

<center>Box 3 National-level examples of crisis response to the pandemic</center>

iv. Adjusting existing policies and strengthening policy dialogue. The pandemic has weakened education systems in many areas, including learning, teacher management, and public finance (World Bank 2020). Existing policies and routine procedures must be reviewed (e.g., exams; progression, entry, exit requirements; teacher/education personnel deployment; student financial support; infrastructure priorities; class sizes, etc.). This will require protecting the budgetary allocations for education and likely investing in additional resources to meet heightened compulsions (World Bank 2020). Such policy action is strengthened by integrated feedback loops, monitoring, and readjustment, and strengthening mechanisms for policy dialogue. The role of the cross-sectoral planning body recommended above is critical in this regard.

2. Ensure comprehensive education continuity and access, focusing on the most vulnerable.

Education continuity during school closures and throughout intermittent reopening phases depends on instituting comprehensive remote and distance learning plans (not online only) that are appropriate, accessible, and ensure participation from vulnerable groups. Disparities due to the digital divide, coupled with the existing learning crisis, resulted in more than 407 million children and youth entering the pandemic without mastering basic skills despite formal schooling (UIS 2018).

Based on the initial COVID-19 response experiences of 127 countries, UNICEF recommends (Dreesen et al. 2020):

   (1) using multiple delivery channels for remote learning with a combination of digital and non-digital approaches;
   (2) strengthening teacher and parent/caregiver support;
   (3) gathering feedback to improve reach and quality.

First responses in many countries included a substantial shift to emergency online learning. This may not be appropriate or feasible for all learners, contexts, levels, or subjects. Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data show inequitable access to computing and internet infrastructure, within and across countries (Hereward, Jenkins, and Idele 2020). There is a digital divide —a gap in all regions disproportionately affecting girls and women (OECD 2018), lower-income households, and remote populations. Furthermore, the needs of learners with disabilities tend to be neglected in emergency changes to delivery modes (McClain-Nhlapo 2020).

Initial estimates suggest more than 500 million children and youth did not access distance education during current closures (Giannini 2020). Mass closures further highlighted the lack of systems preparedness to support teachers (González et al. 2019), facilitators, and parents/caregivers in optimally using technologies for learning (Dreesen et al. 2020; Brossard et al. 2020). These are exacerbated in existing emergency contexts.

Figure 2. UNICEF decision tree for remote learning

Implementing a range of remote and distance learning approaches beyond standalone platforms is essential (Hereward et al. 2020). UNICEF's decision tree can help navigate remote learning solutions (Figure 2).[8] Some countries have used a mix of technologies and resources, including special radio and television broadcasts, SMS messaging, tele-help lines, and take-home print-based packages for parent/carer-guided instruction (UNESCO 2020c). Developing material for learners with special needs, supported by the use of closed captions and audio recordings, live sign language, Braille, large print, etc., is essential. Online content should use open-source tools and be free. Extending free access and hotspots for homes and connectivity in remote locations has been instituted in some countries. These can contribute to promising practices for more equitable remote learning (Dreesen et al. 2020).

Identifying alternative learning pathways, which may include equivalency qualifications, reassessing examination structures, and entry- and exit-level requirements is important. Some of these may be immediate concerns. Longer-term and coordinated systems planning should also include developing and institutionalizing learning continuity plans and developing allied service plans across sectors. In the long term, innovations and adjustments can be institutionalized throughout recovery and beyond
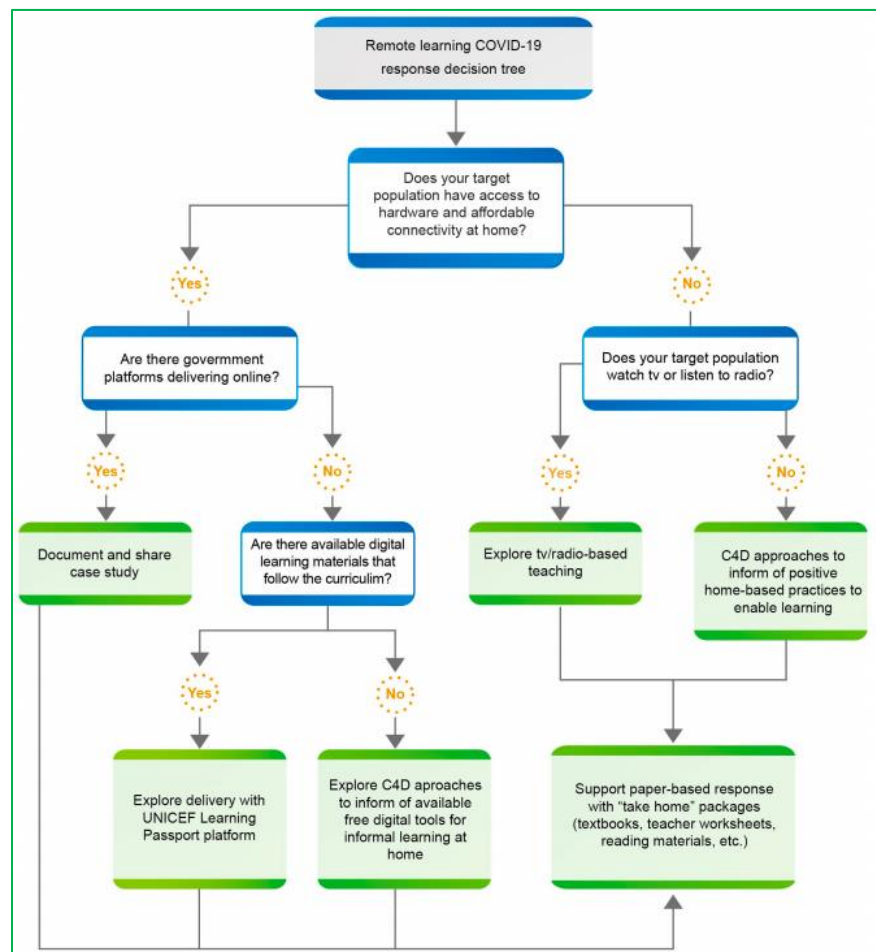
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[8] Note, Figure 2: C4D refers to Communication for Development.
Sources for UNICEF decision tree: UNICEF (2020b, 2020c)

to help learners who have fallen behind or who have difficulty transitioning, extending them to those already out-of-school.

3. Address supply, well-being, and capacity of teaching and educational personnel, in addition to working conditions as educational front-line workers to ensure quality education and learning.

The pandemic will impact the supply of teaching and educational personnel.[9] In some cases, unplanned attrition due to health and safety concerns may combine with existing shortages as the need for even smaller class sizes is heightened to safely reopen schools.

Teachers are key to improving educational quality and learning outcomes. Globally, we entered the pandemic with an estimated shortfall of 68.8 million teachers—24.4 million in primary and 44.4 million in secondary education (UIS 2016). Of these, an additional 3.4 million primary and 16.7 million secondary teachers were already required to expand quality access and reduce average class size, and the remaining 48.7 million, to replace teachers lost through attrition. Gaps are more acute across some countries, levels, and subjects, and are not uniform within countries. Supporting teacher supply in conflict and emergency contexts with strained capacity, including refugee host countries, is also required. Single-classroom and single-teacher schools will have specific implications on teacher supply and required infrastructure in some contexts.

Teachers and other educational personnel are not immune. Safe working conditions and protecting well-being, including increased healthcare measures such as routine testing (Allen et al. 2020), are essential for ensuring sustainable education delivery. Physical distancing measures and safe school operations are required to safeguard teachers and educational personnel, as much as students and the school community (Jones et al. 2020; UNICEF et al. 2020). The increased urgent demands on teachers, of new and alternative delivery models, require capacity building in instructional methods for more equitable remote and distance learning. Moreover, teachers and administrators should be consulted during planning of policy changes in the delivery of distance education and decisions on school reopening.

Finally, the economic security of teachers must be protected. Continued pay and flexible working policies are required—the latter particularly for female teachers who may face additional domestic and caring responsibilities. There are further risks for non-government teachers. On average, 17% of teachers in primary education worked in private institutions, and a similar share in secondary education, based on countries that reported data.[10] Some independent private schools may have suspended pay. In some instances, private schools have lobbied governments for subsidies in the interim, but education budgets are constrained. The longer-term impact is unclear given the prominence of private schools in some contexts (Srivastava 2020).

4. Strengthen risk analysis and use health and education data to monitor, guide, and institute localized responses.

The pandemic exposed the urgent need to strengthen risk analysis and institute risk reduction strategies in educational planning for resilient systems. Immediate response, recovery, and future preparedness depend on relevant data collection and generating appropriate evidence.

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[9] We focus on teachers as the most immediate frontline education workers. This is also partially because available global data are on teacher supply. However, local analyses should consider education worker supply more broadly, including administrators, principals, and support staff and workers.

[10] Estimates for this brief based on countries with reported data (UIS database, February 2020 release). https://apiportal.uis.unesco.org/

Local health metrics on transmission should be linked with education data to better assess risk (Allen et al. 2020; UIS 2020). This may enable governments and local authorities to consider localized reopening plans in areas where the health situation may better allow for more sustainable reopening, rather than blunt systems-wide opening and closing of institutions.

Ideally, the existing education data should be disaggregated by vulnerable groups and mapped to each school community. Education monitoring exercises should be coordinated with local education authorities to avoid duplication. To collect relevant education data, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics suggests (UIS 2020):

1. rapid data collection formats focusing on key indicators and sampling schools and students rather than the full population;
2. monitoring equity by over-representing vulnerable students (e.g., girls, students in poverty, students with special needs, minority or linguistic groups);
3. frequent low-stakes learning measurement.

5. When appropriate, ensure safe school operations and "better schools."

Reopening will entail robust measures, and allocation of additional financial, human, and physical resources (Al-Samarrai 2020; GEM Report 2020). However, implementing even the most basic measures is compromised in many countries. Only 53% of the schools surveyed in 81 countries had basic hygiene services, that is, a handwashing facility with soap and water (WHO/UNICEF JMP 2018). Over 850 million children attend schools without these services, and an overwhelming number of children will return to unsafe schools unless basic physical infrastructure is upgraded quickly and at scale.

When the time is right to access formal spaces, a range of inclusive and safe school practices and infection control and prevention measures should be instituted (e.g., sanitization and hygiene supplies; water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices; physical distancing; appropriate ventilation; and inclusive behaviors addressing stigma and xenophobia, etc.) (Jones et. al 2020; UNESCO et al. 2020; UNICEF et al. 2020; UNICEF 2020a). Safe school operations, child health and wellbeing, learning continuity, safe school reopening, and opening better schools are integral to resuming regular formal education (Jones et al. 2020; UNESCO et al. 2020; UNICEF 2020b; UNICEF et al., 2020).

6. Increase domestic, humanitarian, and international financing, international cooperation, and cross-collaboration for education.

One in three countries entered the pandemic with under-financed education systems (UNESCO 2017, 2020b). While public education expenditure increased across all country-income groups between 1999 and 2015, with much higher average increases for low-income countries, it was relatively constant as a proportion of GDP (Al-Samarrai et al. 2019). There are great disparities in per-child allocations. High-income countries spent on average 43 times as much as low-income countries per child in primary education (Al-Samarrai 2020). Senior World Bank analysts, including the Global Director for Education, stress the need for increased education financing in view of the pandemic. However, they note: "There is evidence that some countries are already cutting their education budgets to make space for the required spending on health and social protection" (Al-Samarrai 2020, 5). This can have grave effects. The G20 countries should maintain and increase domestic education finance.

G20 OECD DAC donors must ensure that aid commitments to education are, at the very least, stable if not increased. Official development assistance (ODA) for education has been volatile. However, in

2018, ODA disbursements to education reached their highest ever recorded levels (GEM Report 2020). The effects of the pandemic on donor countries threatens the total volume of aid, and specifically for education (Al-Samarrai 2020; GEM Report 2020; World Bank 2020). The Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report estimates that the economic effects of COVID-19 could result in a fall of up to USD 2 billion for aid to education by 2022, and could take another six years until 2018 levels are reached again (GEM Report 2020). The G20 donor response must show renewed and lasting commitment given the scale of the global education emergency.

The GEM Report recommends three donor policies: (1) the share of education ODA must be protected; (2) additional funding for flexible responses to COVID-19 not previously programmed must be made available; and (3) bilateral donors should consider consolidating fragmented aid efforts to support multilateral channels (GEM Report 2020). The replenishment round for the Global Partnership for Education and the dedicated fund for emergencies, Education and Education Cannot Wait, are potential opportunities.

While humanitarian support for education has increased in recent years, it is still severely constrained. The share of education from total humanitarian aid was 3% in 2019 (USD 705 million) (GEM Report 2020). Of relevance to the G20, the European Commission substantially increased its investment to humanitarian aid for education in emergencies, from 1% in 2015 to 10% in 2019 (ECHO 2020). G20 donors must sustain this commitment in view of the pandemic and consider harmonized funding through funds for crisis intervention. Through global policy leadership, the G20 is uniquely placed to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on education systems in existing conflict and emergency contexts and in new areas severely affected by the pandemic.

The G20 must mobilize investments to the Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19 (GLOBAL HRP COVID-19 2020). Gaps for education are severe. To date, only USD 1.12 M of the total USD 299 M requirements for education have been met (Financial Tracking Service 2020). The increased and rapidly unfolding needs created by the crisis, require sustained multi-year support.

Concluding Remarks

The transformative impacts of education on health outcomes, infant and child survival, girls' and women's empowerment, employment, and economic growth are well known. Investing in education is key to addressing long-term recovery. G20 leadership in prioritizing and financing education will enable rebuilding resilient societies in view of the impacts of COVID-19 and accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Yoshida, Hirosato, and Tanaka 2018).

Lessons learned from the impact of COVID-19 on the global education emergency should lead to:

(1) more coordinated and cross-sectoral national and global dialogues and comprehensive sector planning processes;

(2) integrated responses on how to reach the most vulnerable;

(3) action to support countries experiencing pre-COVID-19 crises; and

(4) making education systems more resilient.

This will ensure stronger and more sustainable education systems for all, while better meeting the needs of the vulnerable and at-risk

Acknowledgement

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