Policy Brief

COVID-19 & Disruptions to Education

May 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic is wreaking unprecedented havoc on the lives of millions, creating devastating impacts on children, families and communities around the world. This brief focuses on the pandemic's impact on children's education, which cannot be overstated. COVID-19 related school and university closures have disrupted the education of more than 1.5 billion learners—over 90% of the world's student population.[1]

Where they are able, schools are pivoting towards distance learning solutions. Where that is not feasible, the academic year has effectively halted, denying millions of girls and boys access to learning. The pandemic is radically amplifying pre-existing vulnerabilities and the barriers many of the world's most vulnerable children already faced to enjoy their right to quality, safe and inclusive education. This fundamentally jeopardises the collective progress made toward achievement of Sustainable Development Goal #4 and threatens a backslide in ensuring equitable and inclusive access to education for all.[2]

Disruption to education disproportionately affects the most vulnerable children—those living in poverty, girls, children with disabilities, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and others in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Moreover, the spread of COVID-19 presents unique threats to children and families who have little or no access to social protection and may be living in high-density urban slums, informal settlements, or crowded refugee camps.

As these most vulnerable children are least likely to have access to alternative education, there will be worsening inequality between those with access to online distance learning and parents better prepared for home schooling, and those without any access to remote learning modalities and/or in home situations not conducive to continuing their studies. While out of school, children will become more vulnerable to engaging in unsafe practices and negative coping mechanisms. School closures will leave them increasingly exposed to violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation.

In situations of existing armed conflict, the risk of recruitment by armed forces or groups has increased, as children experience interruptions to their learning and can feel their opportunity for a bright future is compromised. As schools remain closed, the risk for parties to conflict to occupy education facilities becomes greater, hindering a return to learning for children once COVID-19 related closures end.[3]

School interruptions raise specific concerns for girls. For example, the Ebola epidemic in parts of Africa exacerbated gender inequality and affected countries recorded an increase in physical and sexual violence against girls, adolescent pregnancies and child marriage. In Sierra Leone, school closures due to the Ebola epidemic were linked to 11,000 schoolgirls becoming pregnant and being unable to return to school.[4] When schools do re-open, vulnerable children like these may drop out due to their worsened circumstances during the school closures, particularly adolescent girls.

School closures also deprive children of critical learning and development opportunities in safe and protective environments, as well as a sense of stability and belonging to community.

Self-isolation at home as a response to COVID-19 can negatively affect children's mental health and well-being. For the 368 million children now missing school meals, the lack of access to nutritious food can also have devastating effects on their survival and healthy development.[5]

These most vulnerable children are confronted with the possibility of further losses to their education, leaving them further behind by worsening inequality and jeopardising their future potential.

World Vision's Response

COVID-19 has forced nationwide school closures in almost all of the countries where World Vision provides education support. World Vision is coordinating with relevant ministries of education (MoEs) to build culturally and contextually appropriate and regionally specific strategies to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on students and vulnerable children due to school closures. World Vision's COVID-19 education-related response objectives are to:

1. Ensure continued learning for all, including children in fragile and humanitarian contexts;

2. Protect children's well-being at school and at home during school closures;

3. Support teachers and parents with home-based learning tools and approaches, as well as emotional support; and

4. Collaborate with and support governments to build back better after the crisis, so even more children, including those most vulnerable, can go to school in the future.

While each country's context and needs are different, World Vision will achieve these objectives through a combination of interventions. Working closely with MoEs and national response coordination platforms, World Vision is helping to identify innovative solutions for distance/remote learning and early childhood development.

This includes strategies for reaching those most vulnerable in fragile and humanitarian contexts, and providing education kits with alternative, age-appropriate, locally available and relevant resources that are accessible to all (e.g., activity guides, guided lessons and activities in hard copy, radio, televised or digital format). World Vision will train teachers on COVID-19 risk reduction, preparation for potential school closures, and possible shifts to alternative learning approaches where schools are open, as well as safe digital learning platforms while they are closed. World Vision is providing parents and teachers with information and opportunities to exchange around home-based learning via radio, TV, Facebook, WhatsApp, SMS, and public bulletin boards, and will also integrate mental health and psychosocial support for children, teachers and parents throughout these interventions.

For example, World Vision Zimbabwe adapted its 'holiday learning' programme and community volunteers are supporting children's continued distance learning. To overcome the digital divide, World Vision is supporting Ugandan children to continue their studies via radio. In Ecuador, World Vision is providing parents and caregivers with education kits to support continued learning at home.

World Vision's Recommendations

COVID-19 response planning must prioritise education, with an emphasis on continued learning for the most vulnerable children while schools are closed, and on concerted efforts to ensure children's re-enrollment when schools re-open. World Vision's attention is centred on continued learning amidst school closures, addressing the needs and protecting the well-being of those most vulnerable throughout the crisis, and building education systems back better when schools reopen. As such, World Vision recommends:

Governments should:

- Develop and implement a coordinated COVID-19 education response, in collaboration with UN agencies, NGOs and donors. This response must include a strategy for reaching and supporting the most vulnerable children, in particular refugees, IDPs, migrants, those living in urban slums and informal settlements, girls, and children with disabilities. Plans should focus not just on mitigation and recovery but also building back better to ensure even more children can access education in the future.

- Urgently roll out child-friendly, age-appropriate distance education methods such as TV, radio or online learning to ensure continued education, and limit disruptions and the potential long-term impact of school closures on children, especially those most vulnerable. Ensure curriculum includes life skills aimed at minimising risks related to exclusion, improving psychosocial well-being and increasing capacity to mitigate risks of violence and stigmatisation. Incorporate accessible materials to support parents and caregivers with alternative home-based learning.

- Train and equip teachers to adapt their teaching approaches in this rapidly changing environment, and provide them with the needed resources to deliver content on a remote basis.

- Explore open source platforms and advocate to private sector service providers, such as telecommunications companies, to make their products and services accessible to the poorest and most marginalised by cutting costs, freely distributing devices or providing services free of charge.

- Ensure online learning respects child safeguarding and data protection requirements, and take care to ensure that reliance on digital solutions does not exacerbate the inequities of the digital divide or lead to the proprietisation of basic education resources.

- Protect teachers' and parents' well-being and economic security during the response by prioritising teachers' job security and advocating with private employers to provide parents and caregivers flexible working arrangements to enable their children's continued care and education.

- Plan for safe re-opening of schools and prepare nationwide back-to-school campaigns once schools re-open. Make a concerted effort to ensure that all children enrolled in school prior to the pandemic return afterwards, while also targeting out-of-school children. Develop preparedness plans and measures, in consultation with UN agencies, NGOs and donors, to ensure that all actors are ready to take coordinated action for education continuity in the event of future school closures and to achieve successful re-enrollment of students upon recovery.

- Remove school fees, other direct costs and policy barriers that could prevent vulnerable children from returning to or accessing school. This includes policies such as bans on re-entry of pregnant girls and young mothers into schools or enrollment of refugees in the national school system.

Governments & UN agencies should:

- Ensure school facilities are not occupied by parties to conflict, or used as shelters, treatment centres, warehouses or for other response purposes, in order to facilitate speedy return to school once restrictions are eased.

- Upon re-opening of schools, ensure water, sanitation and hygiene services are available.

- Where school facilities were used as part of the response to COVID-19, ensure deep cleaning of buildings and removal of furniture before children return.

UN agencies & NGOs should:

- Ensure that grassroots organisations and other key local stakeholders are included in humanitarian response planning to help identify contextualised solutions for particularly vulnerable groups.

- Support parents and caregivers in administering home-based learning tools and solutions while minimising the burden placed on them as they become the providers of education for their children.

- Work with closed schools to deliver accessible, child-friendly protection and safety messages to parents and children that limit panic and distress, reassure, and encourage adherence to health and prevention guidance, in line with Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action guidelines.[6]

- Identify alternative modalities to mitigate the harm of the interruption of school meals, such as distribution of take-home rations using the World Food Programme's (WFP) recommendations on food distribution procedures in the context of COVID-19.

- Advocate with national governments for safe and appropriate re-opening of schools, and support preparations for nationwide back-to-school campaigns, where appropriate. In particular, work with national and local authorities to ensure back-to-school campaigns target out-of-school children, as well as those already enrolled pre-pandemic.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Three boys from the same family share this tablet provided by World Vision to do their school work. Photo Credit: World Vision

Donors should:

- Increase development and humanitarian resources for education, particularly by fully funding the Global Humanitarian Response Plan Education appeal of $268.8M[7] and, at minimum, maintaining and protecting existing education programming from budget cuts due to the COVID-19 response.

- Increase support to key education multi-stakeholder partnerships such as the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait in light of COVID-19 and the ongoing need to replenish resources.

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[1] UNESCO, "COVID-19 Impact on Education," as of 22 April 2020. https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse Learners include children, youth and adults (pre-primary, primary, secondary, tertiary education).
[2] Sustainable Development Goal #4: to ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.
[3] Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, "Factsheet on the Impacts of COVID-19 on Children in Armed Conflict," 20 April 2020. https://watchlist.org/publica-tions/factsheet-on-the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-children-in-armed-conflict/
[4] UNFPA, "Recovering from the Ebola Virus Disease: Rapid Assessment of Pregnant Adolescent Girls in Sierra Leone," https://sierraleone.unfpa.org/en/publications/recovering-ebola-virus-disease-rapid-assessment-pregnant-adolescent-girls-sierra-leone
[5] WFP, "Global Monitoring of School Meals During COVID-19 School Closures," as of 7 May 2020. https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map/index.html
[6] Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, "Technical Note: Protection of Children during the Coronavirus Pandemic (v.1)," https://www.unicef.org/media/65991/file
[7] UN OCHA, "Global Humanitarian Response Plan on COVID-19 (April – December 2020): May Update," as of 7 May 2020. https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHRP-COVID19_May_Update.pdf

Colombia: World Vision's Education Cannot Wait project delivered 320 packages of food and study materials for children from indigenous and migrant communities in La Guajira. Photo Credit: World Vision

World Vision is undertaking the largest humanitarian response in its 70-year history to limit the spread of COVID-19 and reduce its impact on vulnerable children and their families, aiming to reach 72 million people, half of them children, over the next 18 months and raising US $350 million to do so. Response efforts will cover 70 countries where World Vision has a field presence, prioritising scale up of preventative measures to limit the spread of the disease; strengthening health systems and workers; supporting children impacted by COVID-19 through education, child protection, food security, and livelihoods; and advocating to ensure vulnerable children are protected. For more information, read World Vision's COVID-19 Global Response Plan.

World Vision

World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities to reach their full potential by tackling the root causes of poverty and injustice. World Vision serves all people, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.

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