

**Policy Brief:  
Education  
during COVID-19  
and beyond**

AUGUST 2020

# Executive summary

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 per cent of the world's student population, up to 99 per cent in low and lower-middle income countries.

The crisis is exacerbating pre-existing education disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children, youth, and adults – those living in poor or rural areas, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities and forcibly displaced persons – to continue their learning. Learning losses also threaten to extend beyond this generation and erase decades of progress, not least in support of girls and young women's educational access and retention. Some 23.8 million additional children and youth (from pre-primary to tertiary) may drop out or not have access to school next year due to the pandemic's economic impact alone.

Similarly, the education disruption has had, and will continue to have, substantial effects beyond education. Closures of educational institutions hamper the provision of essential services to children and communities, including access to nutritious food, affect the ability of many parents to work, and increase risks of violence against women and girls.

As fiscal pressures increase, and development assistance comes under strain, the financing of education could also face major challenges, exacerbating massive pre-COVID-19 education funding gaps. For low income countries and lower-middle-income countries, for instance, that gap had reached a staggering \$148 billion annually and it could now increase by up to one-third.

On the other hand, this crisis has stimulated innovation within the education sector. We have seen innovative approaches in support of education and training continuity: from radio and television to take-home packages. Distance learning solutions were developed thanks to quick responses by governments and partners all over the world supporting education continuity, including the Global Education Coalition convened by UNESCO. We have also been reminded of the essential role of teachers and that governments and other key partners have an ongoing duty of care to education personnel.

But these changes have also highlighted that the promising future of learning, and the accelerated changes in modes of delivering quality education, cannot be separated from the imperative of leaving no one behind. This is true for children and youth affected by a lack of resources or enabling environment to access learning. It is true for the teaching profession and their need for better training in new methods of education delivery, as well as support. Last but not least, this is true for the education community

at large, including local communities, upon whom education continuity depends during crisis and who are key to building back better.

The COVID-19 crisis and the unparalleled education disruption is far from over. As many as 100 countries have yet to announce a date for schools to reopen and across the world, governments, unions, parents and children are grappling with when and how to approach the next phase. Countries have started planning to reopen schools nationwide, either based on grade level and by prioritizing exam classes, or through localized openings in regions with fewer cases of the virus. However, given the continued virulence of the virus, the majority of countries surveyed in May–June 2020 had yet to decide on a reopening date. These decisions carry enormous social and economic implications and will have lasting effects on educators, on children and youth, on their parents – especially women – and indeed on societies as a whole.

## Recommendations

Preventing a learning crisis from becoming a generational catastrophe requires urgent action from all.

Education is not only a fundamental human right. It is an enabling right with direct impact on the realization of all other human rights. It is a global common good and a primary driver of progress across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals as a bedrock of just, equal, inclusive peaceful societies. When education systems collapse, peace, prosperous and productive societies cannot be sustained.

In order to mitigate the potentially devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments and stakeholders are encouraged to pursue the following policy responses:

- > SUPPRESS TRANSMISSION OF THE VIRUS AND PLAN THOROUGHLY FOR SCHOOL RE-OPENINGS:** The single most significant step that countries can take to hasten the reopening of schools and education institutions is to suppress transmission of the virus to control national or local outbreaks. Once they have done so, to deal with the complex challenge of reopening, it is important to be guided by the following parameters: ensure the safety of all; plan for inclusive re-opening; listen to the voices of all concerned; and coordinate with key actors, including the health community.<sup>1</sup>
- > PROTECT EDUCATION FINANCING AND COORDINATE FOR IMPACT:** The pandemic has pushed the world into the deepest global recession in living memory which will have lasting effects on economies and public finances. National authorities and the international community need to protect education financing through the following avenues: strengthen domestic revenue mobilization, preserve the share of expenditure for education as a top priority and address inefficiencies in education spending; strengthen international coordination to address the debt crisis; and protect official development assistance (ODA) for education.
- > BUILD RESILIENT EDUCATION SYSTEMS FOR EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:** Strengthening the resilience of education systems enables countries to respond to the immediate challenges of safely reopening schools and positions them to better cope with future crises. In this regard, governments could consider the following: focus on equity and inclusion; reinforce capacities for risk management, at all levels of the

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<sup>1</sup> Guidance is available from the United Nations and other education partners.

system; ensure strong leadership and coordination; and enhance consultation and communication mechanisms.

➤ **REIMAGINE EDUCATION AND ACCELERATE CHANGE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING:** The massive efforts made in a short time to respond to the shocks to education systems remind us that change is possible. We should seize the opportunity to find new ways to address the learning crisis and bring about a set of solutions previously considered difficult or impossible to implement. The

following entry points could be to the fore of our efforts: focus on addressing learning losses and preventing dropouts, particularly of marginalized groups; offer skills for employability programmes; support the teaching profession and teachers' readiness; expand the definition of the right to education to include connectivity; remove barriers to connectivity; strengthen data and monitoring of learning; strengthen the articulation and flexibility across levels and types of education and training.

# I. Shocks and aftershocks of the pandemic

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## THE WORLD OF EDUCATION BEFORE COVID-19

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Before the pandemic, the world was already facing formidable challenges in fulfilling the promise of education as a basic human right. Despite the near universal enrolment at early grades in most countries, an extraordinary number of children – more than 250 million – were out of school,<sup>2</sup> and nearly 800 million adults were illiterate.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, even for those in school, learning was far from guaranteed. Some 387 million or 56 per cent of primary school age children worldwide were estimated to lack basic reading skills.<sup>4</sup>

From a financing point of view, the challenge was already daunting before COVID-19. The early 2020 estimate of the financing gap to reach Sustainable Development Goal 4 – quality education – in low and lower-middle-income countries was a staggering \$148 billion annually.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that the COVID-19 crisis will increase this financing gap by up to one-third.<sup>6</sup>

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## SCHOOL CLOSURES AND EDUCATION DISRUPTION

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest disruption of education in history, having already had a near universal impact on learners and teachers around the world, from pre-primary to secondary schools, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, universities, adult learning, and skills development establishments. By mid-April 2020, 94 per cent of learners worldwide were affected by the pandemic, representing 1.58 billion children and youth, from pre-primary to higher education, in 200 countries.

The ability to respond to school closures changes dramatically with level of development: for instance, during the second quarter 2020, 86 per cent of children in primary education have been effectively out of school in countries with low human development – compared with just 20 per cent in countries with very high human development.<sup>7</sup>

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2 258 million in 2018, UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), “Out-of-School Children and Youth”, available at <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/out-school-children-and-youth>.

3 773 million according to most recent UIS data: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/literacy>.

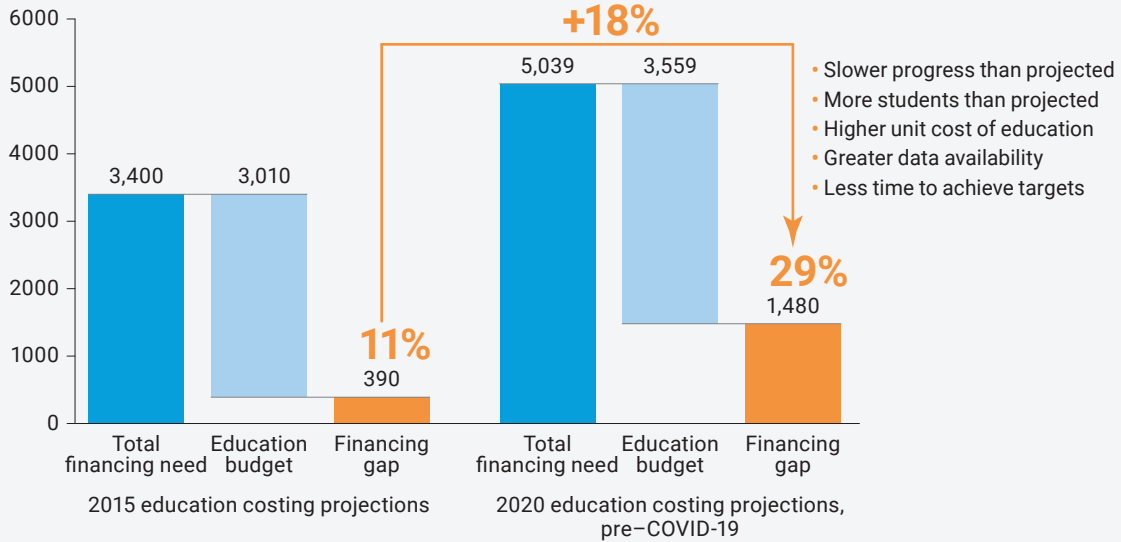
4 UIS 2017 Fact Sheet, available at <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs46-more-than-half-children-not-learning-en-2017.pdf>.

5 UNESCO (forthcoming): “The impact of Covid-19 on the cost of achieving SDG 4”, GEM Report Policy Paper 42.

6 Ibid.

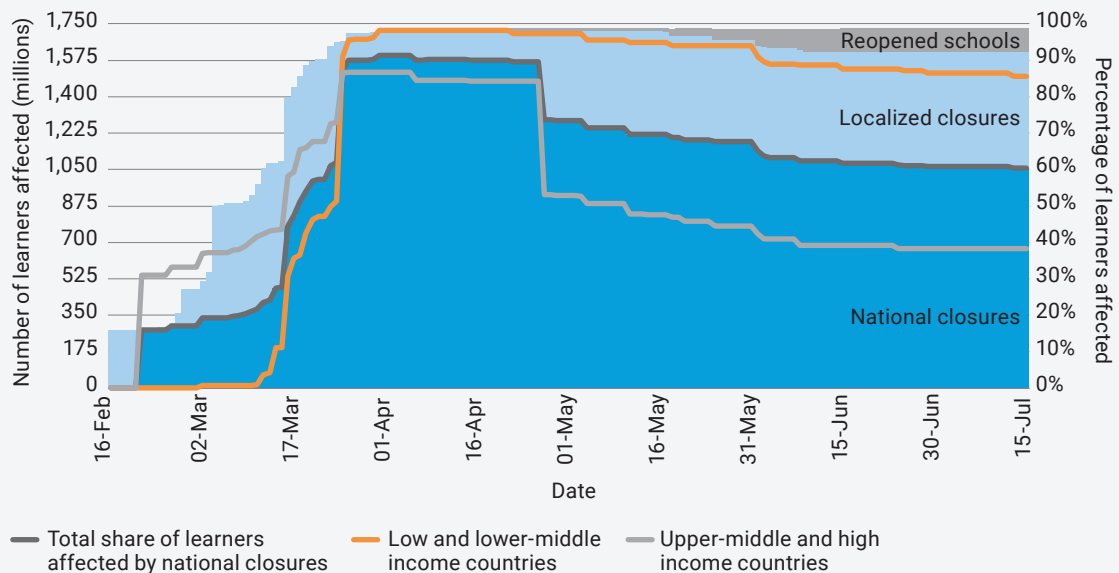
7 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *COVID-19 and human development: Assessing the crisis, envisioning the recovery. 2020 Human Development Perspectives*, 2020, New York: UNDP, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/hdp-covid>.

**FIGURE 1: PRE-COVID-19 FINANCING GAP TO REACH SDG 4**  
(millions of dollars)



Source: UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020). New realities for education affected by COVID Cost predictions.

**FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF CHILDREN AFFECTED BY SCHOOL CLOSURES GLOBALLY**



Source: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> and authors' calculations.

In Africa, particularly in the Sahel region, nationwide school closures due to COVID-19 came at a time when a very large number of schools had already been closed for several months because of severe insecurity, strikes, or climatic hazards. COVID-19 is worsening the situation of education in Sub-Saharan Africa where, prior to the pandemic, 47 per cent of the world's 258 million out-of-school children live (30 per cent due to conflict and emergency).<sup>8</sup>

In the most fragile education systems, this interruption of the school year will have a disproportionately negative impact on the most vulnerable pupils, those for whom the conditions for ensuring continuity of learning at home are limited. Their presence at home can also complicate the economic situation of parents, who must find solutions to provide care or compensate for the loss of school meals.

There is growing concern that if these learners are not properly supported, they may never return to school.<sup>9</sup> This would further exacerbate pre-existing disparities, and risk reversing progress on SDG 4 as well as other SDGs,<sup>10</sup> as well as aggravating the already existing learning crisis<sup>11</sup> and eroding the social and economic resilience of refugees and displaced persons.<sup>12</sup>

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## ALL LEVELS OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING AFFECTED

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The disruptions caused by COVID-19 to everyday life meant that as many as 40 million children worldwide have missed out on early childhood education in their critical pre-school year.<sup>13</sup>

They thus missed a stimulating and enriching environment, learning opportunities, social interaction and in some cases adequate nutrition. This is likely to compromise their longer-term healthy development, especially those children from poor and disadvantaged families.<sup>14</sup>

In technical and vocational education and training systems, vulnerabilities including low levels of digitalization and long-standing structural weaknesses, have been brought to light by the crisis. Disruptions in work places made it difficult to implement apprenticeship schemes and work-based learning modes, key elements of a functional and market-responsive technical and vocational system.

In the higher education sub-sector, while online learning has generally taken place through recorded lectures and online platforms, some universities have postponed learning and teaching until further notice, due to the lack of information technology (IT) infrastructure for both students and teachers. Questions also remain about how to harmonize

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<sup>8</sup> UIS 2019 Fact Sheet no. 56, available at <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/new-methodology-shows-258-million-children-adolescents-and-youth-are-out-school.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> A recent article from the *Economist* cites cases where following lockdowns and quarantine, young girls are being forced into marriage or getting pregnant, placing them at risk of never returning to school, available at <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/07/18/school-closures-in-poor-countries-could-be-devastating>.

<sup>10</sup> Coronavirus-related service disruptions threaten to reverse the decade-long progress made for children and pregnant women in the fight against HIV. UNICEF, "Children, HIV and AIDS", available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-hiv-and-aids-how-will-progress-be-impacted-by-covid-19>.

<sup>11</sup> Before the pandemic, 258 million children and youth of primary- and secondary-school age were out of school, and low schooling quality meant many who were in school learned too little. World Bank, "The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to education and policy responses", available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/the-covid19-pandemic-shocks-to-education-and-policy-responses>.

<sup>12</sup> The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), "Stepping Up – Refugee education in crisis", 2019, available at <https://www.unhcr.org/steppingup>.

<sup>13</sup> UNICEF, "Childcare in a global crisis: the impact of COVID-19 on work and family life", available at <https://www.unicef-irc.org/article/2027-40-million-children-miss-out-on-early-education-in-critical-pre-school-year-due-to.html>.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations, "Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on children", available at [https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420\\_Covid\\_Children\\_Policy\\_Brief.pdf](https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf).

semesters and academic calendars, as some programmes have been successfully implemented online, while others could not be.

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## AN EXACERBATION OF DISPARITIES IN LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

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An estimated 40 per cent of the poorest countries failed to support learners at risk during the COVID-19 crisis,<sup>15</sup> and past experiences show that both education and gender inequalities tend to be neglected in responses to disease outbreaks.<sup>16</sup> Domestic chores, especially for girls, and the work required to run households or farms, can also prevent children from getting sufficient learning time. Children with disabilities who were already marginalized before the outbreak are not always included in strategies of distance learning.<sup>17</sup>

Refugee and forcibly displaced children are further marginalized and deprived of access to support services offered through schools, such as school meals and psychosocial support programmes.

The most vulnerable learners are also among those who have poor digital skills and the least access to the hardware and connectivity required for distance learning solutions implemented during school closures. In half

of 21 European countries examined, Grade 4 pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds were half as likely to have access to the internet as their more advantaged peers.<sup>18</sup> In 7 low income countries, less than 10 per cent of the poorest households have electricity.<sup>19</sup>

Many learners in developing countries, especially the youngest and minority groups, are not fluent in the language of instruction.<sup>20</sup> Even when they could access content they could understand, living conditions, economic stress, and low education levels of parents, including digital skills, meant that many children did not benefit from the stable environment and the learning support needed to adapt to these new modes of instruction. In most European countries, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to lack reading opportunities, a quiet room, and parental support during school closure. In low income and upper-middle income countries alike, children in the poorest households receive significantly less help with their homework.<sup>21</sup>

The learning loss, in the short and long term, is expected to be great. Researchers in Canada estimate that the socio-economic skills gap could increase by more than 30 per cent due to the pandemic.<sup>22</sup> The World Bank identifies three possible scenarios for the loss of learning (figure 3): a reduction in average learning levels for all students, a widening of the distribution of learning achievements due to highly unequal effects of the crisis on various populations, or

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15 UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, 2020: Inclusion and education: all means all*, 2020, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718>.

16 IIEP-UNESCO, "COVID-19 school closures: Why girls are more at risk", available at <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/covid-19-school-closures-why-girls-are-more-risk-13406>.

17 United Nations, "Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on children", available at [https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420\\_Covid\\_Children\\_Policy\\_Brief.pdf](https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf).

18 European Commission, "Educational inequalities in Europe and physical school closures during Covid-19", available at [https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/jrcsh/files/fairness\\_pb2020\\_wave04\\_covid\\_education\\_jrc\\_i1\\_19jun2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/jrcsh/files/fairness_pb2020_wave04_covid_education_jrc_i1_19jun2020.pdf).

19 These include Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Kiribati, Lesotho, Mauritania, and Sudan.

20 UNESCO, *GEM Report, 2020*.

21 UNICEF, "How involved are parents in their children's learning? MICS6 data reveal critical insights", available at <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/parental-involvement-childrens-learning>.

22 Catherine Haecck and Pierre Lefebvre, Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), "Pandemic school closures may increase inequality in test scores", Working Paper No. 20-03, June 2020, available at [https://qrch.esq.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/82/Haecck\\_Lefebvre\\_GRCH\\_WP20-03-5.pdf](https://qrch.esq.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/82/Haecck_Lefebvre_GRCH_WP20-03-5.pdf).



a significant increase of students with very low level of achievement due in part to massive dropouts.<sup>23</sup> This suggests 25 per cent more students may fall below a baseline level of proficiency needed to participate effectively and productively in society, and in future learning, a result of the school closures only.<sup>24</sup>

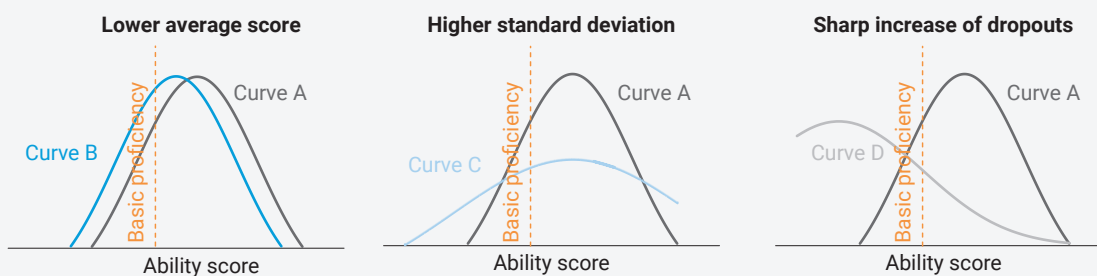
In the foundational years of education, the impact might be the strongest. Simulations on developing countries participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) suggest that without remediation, a loss of learning by one-third (equivalent to a three-month school closure) during Grade 3 might result in 72 per cent of students falling so far behind that by Grade 10 they will have dropped out or will not be able to learn anything in school.<sup>25</sup> The economic

loss might reach \$16,000 of lost earnings over a student's lifetime, translating over time into \$10 trillion of lost earnings globally.<sup>26</sup>

## INCREASED DROPOUT ANTICIPATED

In addition to the learning loss, the economic impact on households is likely to widen the inequities in education achievement. Should millions be pushed into severe poverty, empirical evidence shows that children from households in the poorest quintiles are significantly less likely to complete primary and lower secondary education than those in the richest quintile; this divide can be greater than 50 percentage points in many sub-Saharan countries, as well as in Haiti, Jordan, Nepal, and Pakistan.

**FIGURE 3. SCENARIOS ON LEARNING POST-COVID-19: A LOWER AVERAGE, A HIGHER STANDARD DEVIATION, OR A SHARP INCREASE OF DROPOUTS**



Source: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/we-should-avoid-flattening-curve-education-possible-scenarios-learning-loss-during-school>.

- 23 World Bank, "We should avoid flattening the curve in education – Possible scenarios for learning loss during the school lockdowns", 13 April 2020, available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/we-should-avoid-flattening-curve-education-possible-scenarios-learning-loss-during-school>.
- 24 World Bank, "Simulating the Potential Impacts of the COVID-19 School Closures on Schooling and Learning Outcomes: A set of Global Estimates", 18 June 2020, available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/simulating-potential-impacts-of-covid-19-school-closures-learning-outcomes-a-set-of-global-estimates>.
- 25 Michelle Kaffenberger, "Modeling the long-run learning impact of the COVID-19 learning shock: Actions to (more than) mitigate loss", RISE Insight Series. 2020/017, 4 June 2020, available at [https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI\\_2020/017](https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI_2020/017).
- 26 World Bank, "COVID-19 Could Lead to Permanent Loss in Learning and Trillions of Dollars in Lost Earnings", 18 June 2020, available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/18/covid-19-could-lead-to-permanent-loss-in-learning-and-trillions-of-dollars-in-lost-earnings>.

UNESCO estimates that 23.8 million additional children and youth (from pre-primary to tertiary) may drop out or not have access to school next year due to the pandemic's economic impact alone.<sup>27</sup> The total number of children not returning to their education after the school closures is likely to be even greater. School closures make girls and young women more vulnerable to child marriage, early pregnancy, and gender-based violence – all of which decrease their likelihood of continuing their education.<sup>28</sup>

With the combined effect of the pandemic's worldwide economic impact and the school closures, the learning crisis could turn into a generational catastrophe.

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## A RIPPLE EFFECT BEYOND EDUCATION

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The education disruption will continue to have substantial effects, extending beyond education. Many of these have been laid out in previous policy briefs and include, for instance, food insecurity,<sup>29</sup> economic instability, and violence against women and girls.

Closures of schools and other educational institutions are hampering the provision of essential services to children and communities. The loss of school meals and other health and nutrition

services in the first months of the pandemic affected 370 million children in 195 countries,<sup>30</sup> increasing hunger and nutritional deficiencies for the most disadvantaged. Some countries, however, have been able to adapt and maintain school feeding programmes.<sup>31</sup> The disruption also concerns health and psychosocial services, since education institutions also serve as platforms for prevention, diagnosis, and counselling. As a result, vulnerable groups are experiencing both a loss of essential services and a lack of social protection mechanisms.

As with previous pandemics, COVID-19 has shown that education institution closures represent an increased risk for women and girls, as they are more vulnerable to multiple types of abuse, such as domestic violence, transactional sex, and early and forced marriages.<sup>32</sup>

The closures have also affected the ability of many parents to work. A significant share of working parents rely on childcare and schools. In countries such as France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and USA, 60 per cent of parents have been unable to find alternative solutions for schools and day-care centres. A recent study highlights that women are bearing the greater share of additional time spent on childcare and household tasks.<sup>33</sup> Coupled with the present economic disruption, this will likely contribute to higher earning gaps,

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27 UNESCO, "COVID-19 Education Response: How many students are at risk of not returning to school?" advocacy paper, June 2020.

28 Global Partnership for Education (GPE), "Opinion: Don't let girls' education be another casualty of the coronavirus", 1 May 2020, available at <https://www.globalpartnership.org/news/opinion-dont-let-girls-education-be-another-casualty-coronavirus>.

29 The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that by the end of 2020 the number of people experiencing hunger will increase to 270 million, "Global Monitoring of School Meals During COVID-19 School Closures", available at <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map>.

30 Ibid.

31 Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC), "The social challenge in times of COVID-19", available at [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/45544/1/S2000324\\_en.pdf](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/45544/1/S2000324_en.pdf).

32 United Nations, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women", April 2020, available at [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy\\_brief\\_on\\_covid\\_impact\\_on\\_women\\_9\\_apr\\_2020\\_updated.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_apr_2020_updated.pdf); UNESCO, "Addressing the gender dimensions of school closures", *COVID-19 Education Response, Education Sector Issue Notes, Issue Note N° 3.1*, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373379>.

33 Matt Krents and others, "Easing the COVID-19 burden on working parents", *BCG*, 21 May 2020, available at <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/helping-working-parents-ease-the-burden-of-covid-19>.

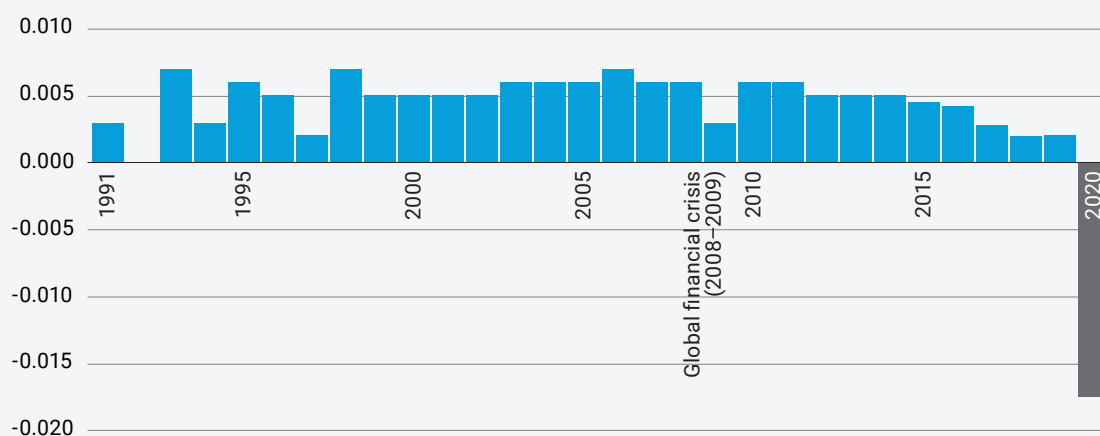
thus widening gender inequality. Furthermore, studies project that working-hour losses will represent up to 400 million full-time jobs.<sup>34</sup>

As parents who lose income make difficult choices, enrolment and girl's education rates may decline, while child labour, recruitment, and exploitation rise. With the number of people in extreme poverty due to COVID-19 projected to increase between 71 and 100 million, attention

should be paid to dropouts, as well as opportunity costs that are likely to affect parent's decisions to support their children's education.<sup>35</sup>

School closures will have not only immediate economic consequences, but long-lasting effects. It is estimated that for the first time since its conception, the Human Development Index, of which the education dimension accounts for a third, will show a striking decline (figure 4).

**FIGURE 4: HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IS FACING AN UNPRECEDENTED HIT SINCE THE CONCEPT WAS INTRODUCED IN 1990**  
*(annual change in human development index)*



Source: HDRO and simulations, available at [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/covid-19\\_and\\_human\\_development\\_0.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/covid-19_and_human_development_0.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), "ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fifth edition", 30 June 2020, available at [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_749399.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_749399.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> World Bank, "Projected poverty impacts of COVID-19", available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/projected-poverty-impacts-of-COVID-19>.

## II. Learning to learn during COVID-19

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As the health crisis unfolded, causing massive socio-economic disruptions, education systems around the world were swift to react and adapt. Governments responded quickly to ensure education continuity and protect the safety of learners and education actors by closing schools<sup>36</sup> and other learning spaces. However, the unequal provision of learning modalities during closures will likely create inequities in the longer term.

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### A WIDE RANGE OF DISTANCE LEARNING TOOLS

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Ensuring learning continuity during the time of school closures became a priority for governments the world over, many of which turned to ICT, requiring teachers to move to online delivery of lessons. As shown in figure 5, countries report that some modalities have been used more than others, depending on education level, with variability across regions. In areas with limited connectivity, governments have used more

traditional distance learning modalities, often a mix of educational television and radio programming, and the distribution of print materials.

Relatively few countries are monitoring the effective reach and use of distance learning modalities. However, estimates indicate variable coverage: distance learning in high income countries covers about 80–85 per cent, while this drops to less than 50 per cent in low income countries.<sup>37</sup> This shortfall can largely be attributed to the digital divide, with the disadvantaged having limited access to basic household services such as electricity; a lack of technology infrastructure;<sup>38</sup> and low levels of digital literacy among students, parents, and teachers.

School closures have necessitated changes in – and in some cases caused serious disruptions to – how students are evaluated.<sup>39</sup> In most countries, exams have been postponed; in a few, they have been cancelled; and, in others, they have been replaced by continuous assessments or alternative modalities, such as online testing for final exams. Innovative continuous assessment

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<sup>36</sup> This brief comments on the education and training sector as a whole, including TVET and adult education. For the comfort of the reader, the remainder of the text refers to “education” to reflect the whole sector. Similarly, the term “school” is used to encompass ECE centres, schools, training centres, universities, and the like.

<sup>37</sup> Based on the UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank joint survey, May–June 2020. Out of 116 countries that responded, few reported monitoring the actual use of distance learning. Available at <http://tcq.uis.unesco.org/survey-education-covid-school-closures>.

<sup>38</sup> According to a recent UNICEF study in 71 countries (out of 183 with data), less than half the population has access to the Internet, with large within-countries inequities. Television and radio access are not universal assets, with an urban-rural divide. In 40 out of the 88 countries for which data is available, television ownership rates among urban households were more than double that of rural households. The largest disparities appeared in sub-Saharan Africa. Available at <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IRB%202020-10%20CL.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> UNESCO, “Review of high-stakes exams and assessments during COVID-19”, available at [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco\\_review\\_of\\_high-stakes\\_exams\\_and\\_assessments\\_during\\_covid-19\\_en.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco_review_of_high-stakes_exams_and_assessments_during_covid-19_en.pdf).

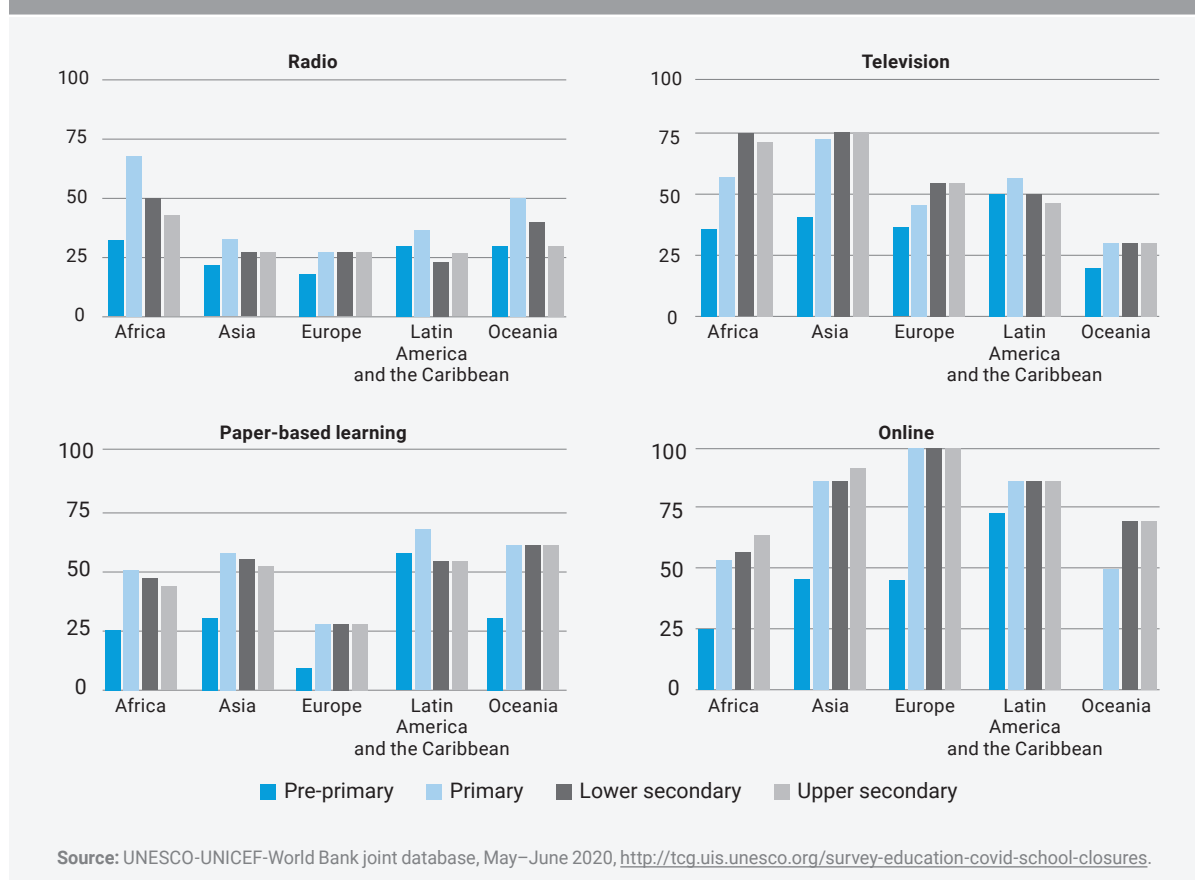
methods have received a lot of attention. Student progress can be monitored with mobile phone surveys, tracking usage and performance statistics from learning platforms and apps, and implementing rapid learning assessments to identify learning gaps.<sup>40</sup> Every solution has its own challenge, notably in terms of equity.

For certain sectors, distance learning came with distinct challenges. In the early-childhood sub-sector, some countries were able to put in place virtual kindergarten for children 3–6 years of age. Technical and vocational apprenticeship

schemes and work-based learning centres were able to adapt in some countries.<sup>41</sup> In many higher education institutions, the move to distance learning has been an opportunity to expand flexible learning modalities, setting the stage for a sustained shift towards more online learning in this sub-sector in the future.<sup>42</sup>

Sustainable solutions should build upon experiences with the widespread use of technology to ensure learning continuity during the pandemic, including for the most marginalized. Several examples are described below.

**FIGURE 5: COUNTRY CHOICE OF DISTANCE LEARNING DURING SCHOOL CLOSURES WAS INFLUENCED BY EDUCATION LEVEL AND REGION (percentage)**



<sup>40</sup> UNICEF, “Putting the ‘learning’ back in remote learning”, June 2020, available at <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/sites/unicef.org/globalinsight/files/2020-06/UNICEF-Global-Insight-remote-learning-issue-brief-2020.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> .g. Brazil, Costa Rica, Kenya, Philippines, South Sudan. ILO, “TVET and skills development in the time of COVID-19”, 28 April 2020, available at <https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/04/28/tvet-and-skills-development-in-the-time-of-covid-19>.

<sup>42</sup> International Association of Universities, *IAU Global Survey Report: The Impact of COVID-19 on higher education around the world*, 2020, available at [https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau\\_covid19\\_and\\_he\\_survey\\_report\\_final\\_may\\_2020.pdf](https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau_covid19_and_he_survey_report_final_may_2020.pdf).

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## EFFORTS MADE TO PROMOTE INCLUSIVE LEARNING

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As states adopt distance learning practices, students with disabilities are facing barriers due to the absence of necessary equipment, internet access, accessible materials, and the support that would allow them to follow online programmes. Some countries are developing tools and resources for learners with disabilities and their parents. This requires enhancing accessibility features, such as audio narration, sign language video, and simplified text, as well as provision of assistive devices and, in some cases, reasonable accommodation. To reach the 700 children with disabilities who are enrolled in Azraq and Za'atari refugee camps in Jordan, for example, one innovation has been the use of transparent masks, so that deaf children can still lip read.<sup>43</sup>

The negative outcomes of prolonged closures disproportionately impact displaced children. This situation is especially precarious for girls, most at risk of permanently dropping out. In response, UNHCR has taken measures to ensure displaced children and youth can access distance learning alternatives as part of national responses and offered health training for teachers and community awareness-raising activities on COVID-19, while upgrading water and sanitation facilities in and around learning spaces.

More than 70 countries have adapted their school feeding programmes to continue supporting children during school closures. Nearly 50 countries are providing take-home rations to children and their families in various forms, including through daily meal delivery and pre-packaged monthly rations. Twenty-two countries have opted to replace the meals with vouchers or cash that families can use to buy food or other essential items. Some 6.9 million learners in 45 low income countries have been reached since the onset of the crisis with take-home rations by governments with the support of the UN system.<sup>44</sup>

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## SUPPORTS FOR TEACHERS' NEEDS

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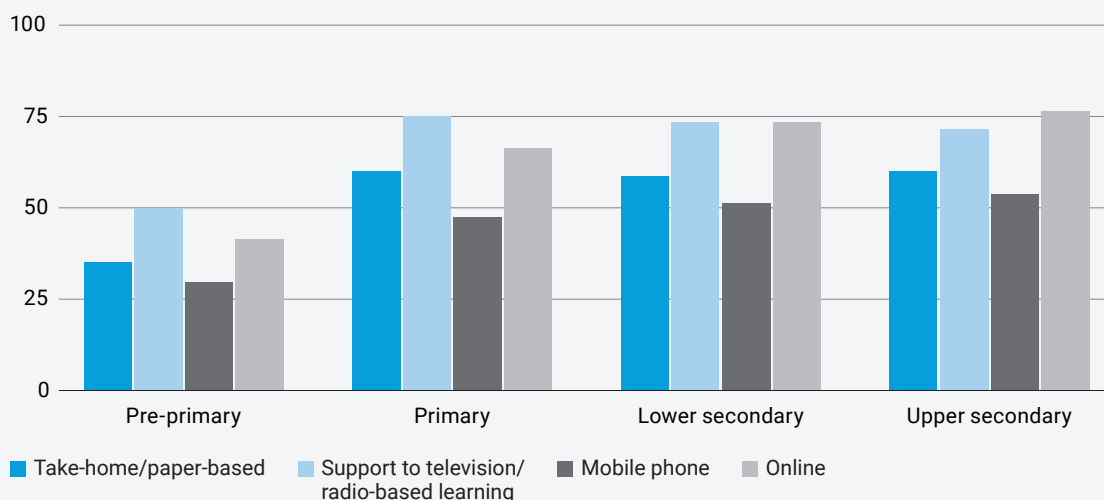
From the onset of the pandemic, teachers were immediately tasked with implementing distance learning modalities, often without sufficient guidance, training, or resources. As figure 6 indicates, this occurred at every level of education. In many contexts, teacher professional development has moved online or been disseminated via telephone and video applications, but marginalized teachers may have missed out on such support. Web-based class meetings and messaging applications have become useful tools and new ways of communicating with their learners and the education community.

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43 UNESCO, *GEM Report, 2020*, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718>. Janet Lennox and Wongani Taulo, "Three innovative responses to COVID-19 that have removed barriers to learning for the most marginalized", *World Education Blog*, available at <https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/07/13/three-innovative-responses-to-covid-19-that-have-removed-barriers-to-learning-for-the-most-marginalised>.

44 WFP, "Global monitoring of school meals during COVID-19 school closures", available at <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map>.

**FIGURE 6: PROPORTION OF TEACHERS REQUIRED TO CONTINUE TEACHING, BY EDUCATIONAL LEVEL AND DISTANCE LEARNING METHOD (percentage affected by group)**



Source: UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank Joint Survey, May-June 2020, available at <http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/survey-education-covid-school-closures>.

Teachers across the globe were largely unprepared to support continuity of learning and adapt to new teaching methodologies. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 64 per cent of primary and 50 per cent of secondary teachers have received even minimum training, which often does not include basic digital skills.<sup>45</sup> Even in contexts with adequate infrastructure and connectivity, many educators lack the most basic ICT skills, meaning they will likely struggle with their own ongoing professional development, let alone with facilitating quality distance learning.<sup>46</sup> The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted that both initial and in-service teacher education are in need of reform to better train teachers in new methods of education delivery.

Teachers' physical health was put at risk when required to provide face-to-face education for the children of essential workers and vulnerable children. Adding to the fear of being exposed to the virus was a fear of losing salaries and benefits, all while coping with increased workloads and family responsibilities. This is especially true of female teachers who had to continue teaching and bore a disproportionate share of family responsibilities.

Some countries integrated psychological support into their contingency plans, manuals, and guides for teachers and local associations; and NGOs mobilized to provide additional support. Many more teachers will need psychological support themselves if they are to

<sup>45</sup> International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, "COVID-19: A global Crisis for Teaching and Learning", available at <https://teachertaskforce.org/knowledge-hub/covid-19-global-crisis-teaching-and-learning>.

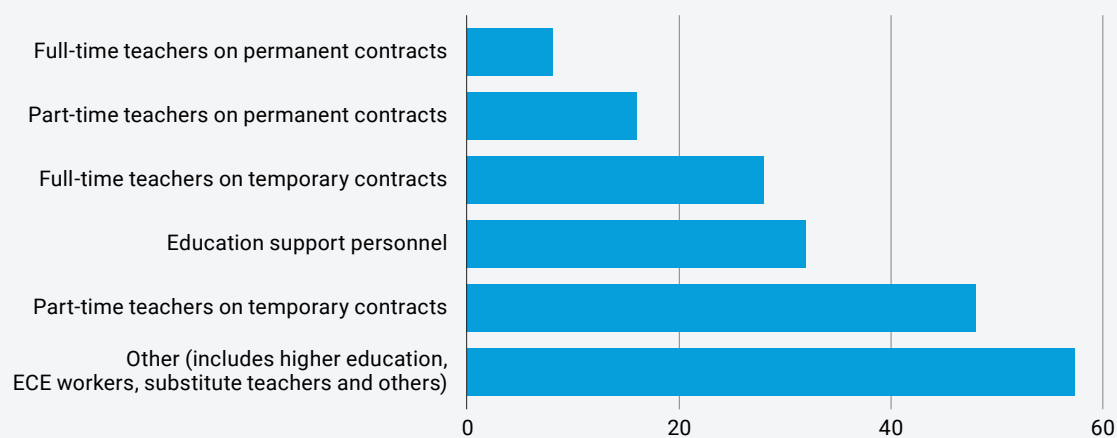
<sup>46</sup> UNESCO, "Education Sector Issue Note 2.2", available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373338/PDF/373338eng.pdf.multi>.

meet the needs of their students.<sup>47</sup> Without this, the strain can lead to burnout, resulting in high rates of absenteeism, and can even lead some teachers to leave their jobs, undermining efforts to build school resilience.<sup>48</sup>

COVID-19 has had varying impacts on the employment and salaries. Recent data suggest that only a minority of countries did not pay statutory teachers.<sup>49</sup> However, furloughing and delays in salary payments were more common.<sup>50</sup> In the public sector, teachers on temporary contracts were especially affected, as contracts were not renewed and those paid by the hour were out of work.

In low-income countries in particular, where parents stopped paying fees or teachers have been unable to teach remotely, teachers lost their livelihoods. A survey by Education International<sup>51</sup> revealed that, among 93 teacher unions from 67 countries, nearly two-thirds reported that education workers in private institutions were significantly affected, with teachers on temporary contracts and support personnel were most affected (figure 7). Refugee teachers are often not part of the national education system and also were vulnerable to the cessation of salaries and job losses while schools were not in session. Failure of non-state schools, either now or in the future, would leave public education systems to absorb high numbers of additional students.<sup>52</sup>

**FIGURE 7: SCHOOL CLOSURE HAD LARGE IMPACT ON EDUCATION WORKFORCE REMUNERATION AND EMPLOYMENT (percentage)**



Source: Education International, "COVID-19 and Education: How Education Unions are Responding, Survey Report", available at [https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020\\_covid19\\_survey\\_report\\_eng\\_final](https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020_covid19_survey_report_eng_final).

47 INEE, "Supporting teachers in crisis contexts during COVID-19", April 2020, available at <https://inee.org/system/files/resources/COVID-19%20Webinar%20Series%20-%20Webinar%205.pdf>.

48 UNESCO, "Supporting teachers and education personnel during times of crisis", available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373338>.

49 UNESCO/ILO, "Supporting teachers in back-to-school efforts: guidance for policy-makers", available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373479>.

50 Education International, "COVID-19 and Education: How Education Unions are Responding, Survey Report", available at [https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020\\_covid19\\_survey\\_report\\_eng\\_final](https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020_covid19_survey_report_eng_final).

51 Ibid.

52 UNESCO, *GEM Report, 2020*, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718>. "Why non-state education requires support in the current pandemic", *World Education Blog*, available at <https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/05/13/why-non-state-education-requires-support-in-the-current-pandemic>.



Non-payment of teacher salaries not only poses a problem for individual, family, and community well-being, but also hinders the delivery of quality education. In the short term, many teachers may need to turn to alternative sources of income and will be unable to support pupils in distance learning. In the long term, schools may face teacher shortages due to attrition. The crisis has been a reminder of the essential role of teachers and that governments and other key partners have an ongoing duty of care to education personnel.

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## NO SINGLE SCHEDULE FOR REOPENING OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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As countries began to see a “flattening of the curve” of new cases of COVID-19 among their population, many governments began to loosen restrictions in an effort to stabilize their economies, including through the reopening of schools, while others have been more cautious and maintained closures, fearing a “second wave”. As of mid-July 2020, over one billion learners are still affected, representing 61 per cent of the world’s total enrolment.<sup>53</sup> Some countries have opened schools and colleges, only to close them again after a resurgence of the virus.

The logistical challenges related to ensuring distance educational continuity during prolonged closures are substantial. Protracted closures threaten the implementation of the academic calendar and of examinations, and

make it next-to-impossible to put remedial programmes in place. Assessing distance learning further complicated the picture, as noted above. Finally, there are risks to the well-being and protection of students (providing school meals, protecting children from abuse and violence), there is a need to address the well-being and health concerns of teachers, and to provide them with remote support, including through teacher training on online pedagogy.

As indicated in figure 8, countries have started planning to reopen schools nationwide, either based on grade level and by prioritizing exam classes, or through localized openings in regions with fewer cases of the virus. However, given the continued virulence of the virus, the majority of countries surveyed in May–June 2020 had yet to decide on the reopening date.

Successive closures and reopenings are likely to continue, as the virus continues to circulate globally. Several countries are planning to implement a “hybrid” or blended model of education provision. Other countries are significantly reducing class sizes or providing lessons outside, and in many countries institutions require that almost all students and their teachers wear masks.<sup>54</sup> Countries in the UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank Joint Survey reported that they plan a number of changes upon reopening: 23 per cent of countries plan to recruit more teachers; 23 per cent will increase class time; 64 per cent will introduce remedial programmes; 32 per cent will introduce accelerated learning programmes; and 62 per cent plan to adjust the scope of curriculum content that will be covered.<sup>55</sup>

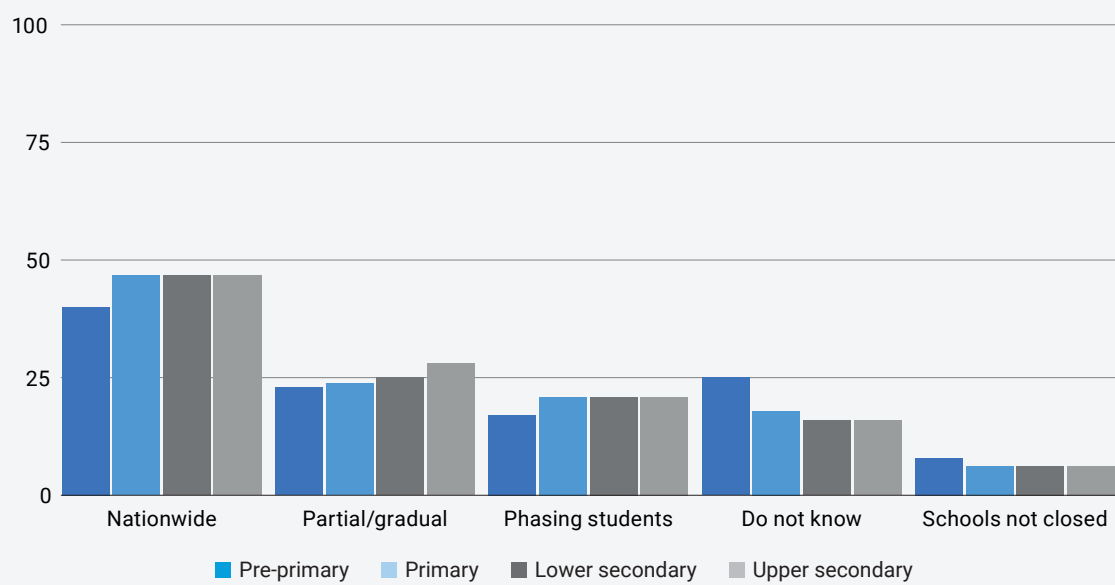
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53 UNESCO, “Education: From disruption to recovery”, available at <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

54 *Science*, “School openings across globe suggest ways to keep coronavirus at bay, despite outbreaks”, available at <https://www.science.org/news/2020/07/school-openings-across-globe-suggest-ways-keep-coronavirus-bay-despite-outbreaks>.

55 UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank Joint Survey, May–June 2020, available at <http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/survey-education-covid-school-closures>.

**FIGURE 8: PLANS FOR SCHOOL REOPENING, BY LEVEL (percentage)**



Source: UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank Joint Survey, May–June 2020, available at <http://tcg.uis.unesco.org/survey-education-covid-school-closures>

# III. Policy recommendations

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Preventing the learning crisis from becoming a generational catastrophe needs to be a top priority for world leaders and the entire education community. This is the best way, not just to protect the rights of millions of learners, but to drive economic progress, sustainable development and lasting peace.

To date, a Global Education Coalition comprised of United Nations agencies, international organizations, private sector entities and civil society representatives, mobilized by UNESCO, have been engaging actively to support national COVID-19 education responses.<sup>56</sup> A new campaign, entitled Save our Future, will help to expand global support for action on education at this time.<sup>57</sup>

In this regard, decision-makers are encouraged to pursue the following recommendations and actions.

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## A. SUPPRESS TRANSMISSION OF THE VIRUS AND PLAN THOROUGHLY FOR SCHOOLS REOPENING

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The single most significant step that countries can take to hasten the reopening of schools and education institutions is to suppress transmission of the virus to control national or local outbreaks. Once they have done so, to deal with complex challenge of reopening, they should be guided by the parameters set out below and should conduct a thorough consultative preparatory process.

**> ENSURE THE SAFETY OF ALL:** The UN and the education community have developed guidance to help countries through the timing, conditions, and processes for reopening education institutions.<sup>58</sup> A key condition to reopening is being able to ensure a safe return to physical premises, while maintaining physical distancing and implementing public health measures, such as the use of masks and frequent handwashing. Such conditions may be more difficult in contexts

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<sup>56</sup> For more information see <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/globalcoalition>.

<sup>57</sup> For more information see [www.SaveOurFuture.world](http://www.SaveOurFuture.world).

<sup>58</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP, World Bank, "Framework for reopening schools", 2020, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373348> and "Reopening schools: How to get education back on track after COVID-19", 2020, available at <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/reopening-schools-how-get-education-back-track-after-covid-19-13424>. See also Global Education Cluster, "Safe back to school: a practitioner's guide", 2020, available at <https://educationcluster.app.box.com/v/Safeback2schoolGuide>.

with overcrowded classes and areas without basic infrastructure and services and will require additional investment.

- > **PLAN FOR INCLUSIVE REOPENING:** The needs of the most marginalized children should be included in reopening strategies and adequate health measures need to be provided for students with special needs. Conducting assessments to estimate learning gaps and prepare remedial or accelerated learning programmes is essential at the time of reopening.
- > **LISTEN TO THE VOICES OF ALL CONCERNED:** Given the role that parents, caretakers, and teachers have played since the onset of the crisis, an essential part of the decision-making process is consultation and joint planning for reopening with communities and education stakeholders. A lack of clearly communicated and predictable planning can lead to a loss of teachers to other forms of employment, and to more children entering the labour market, decreasing the chances that they will return to learning.
- > **COORDINATE WITH KEY ACTORS, INCLUDING THE HEALTH COMMUNITY:** Measures to mitigate the risks of transmitting COVID-19 will be likely be needed in the medium term, so it will be important to reflect on the impact of various reopening strategies, by using whatever information is available and by learning from other countries. Working with health officials in planning reopening is recommended, particularly as scientific evidence continues to evolve. Coordination

with other social policies to protect and promote inclusion of families that suffer under the crisis is equally important.

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## B. PROTECT EDUCATION FINANCING AND COORDINATE FOR IMPACT

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The pandemic has pushed the world into the deepest global recession in living memory.<sup>59</sup> This will have lasting effects on economies and public finances. The consequences have been particularly severe for low and lower-middle income countries. National authorities need to act to mitigate long-term consequences for children, despite constraints on public spending, with education interventions forming part of national COVID-19 stimulus packages alongside health, social protection and economy recovery initiatives. The international community also needs to act to protect education financing. Increasing fiscal space, already prominent in the international agenda, especially for education, has become an inescapable issue. There are several mutually reinforcing entry points to get there:

- > **STRENGTHEN DOMESTIC RESOURCE MOBILIZATION, PRESERVE SHARE FOR EDUCATION AS TOP PRIORITY AND TACKLE INEFFICIENCIES:** As widening the tax base in countries with a large informal sector takes time, other measures (fighting tax avoidance and evasion, revising tax incentives and treaties, etc.) need to be explored without delay.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, education systems themselves share a direct responsibility to increase the fiscal space by improving the

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59 Global growth is estimated at -4.9 per cent in 2020. International Monetary Fund (IMF), "World Economic Outlook Update, June 2020: A Crisis Like No Other, An Uncertain Recovery", available at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEUpdateJune2020>.

60 Education Commission, "Background Paper: The Learning Generation: Domestic Tax and Education", available at <https://report.educationcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Domestic-Tax-and-Education.pdf>.

cost-effectiveness of education services. Ongoing reforms and innovations tackling inefficiencies<sup>61</sup> should be prioritized.

Education ministries should strengthen dialogue with ministries of finance in a systematic and sustained way to maintain and, where possible, increase the share of the national budget for education (in particular when internal reallocation is feasible).

Social sectors in general, and the education sector in particular, should use their powerful voice to insist on the immediate to long-term imperative of their financing, contributing to a strong push for SDG 17.1.<sup>62</sup> Along with making a better case for investments at the national and international level, the education and other social sectors could use their political leverage to give a new urgency to, and to make real progress on, reform of financing for development, in particular, and reform of public financial management.

- **STRENGTHEN INTERNATIONAL COORDINATION TO ADDRESS THE DEBT CRISIS:** G20 countries have already agreed to a “debt service standstill” for least developed countries until the end of 2020.<sup>63</sup> While this will allow some short-term financial leeway, it does not address the needs of all vulnerable countries, nor does it address the longer-term issue of debt sustainability. Relieving, postponing, and restructuring debt for low and middle income countries that request forbearance should be a part

of the solution to create the fiscal space for countries to invest in education, which requires action from all stakeholders.

- **PROTECT OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE (ODA) FOR EDUCATION:** Given the scale of the global education emergency, donors need to ensure that aid commitments to education are, at the very least, kept stable, if not increased, and focus on the most at risk, including children in emergency situations.

This health crisis has exacerbated the effect of intersecting inequalities on education opportunities; leveraging educational activities to communicate necessary changes to public health behaviour is key. Education should not be singled out for cuts, as it was in 2003–2013.<sup>64</sup>

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## C. STRENGTHEN THE RESILIENCE OF EDUCATION SYSTEMS FOR EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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An undeniable human right, education is the bedrock of just, equal, and inclusive societies and a key driver of sustainable development. Strengthening the resilience of education systems enables countries to respond to the immediate challenges of safely reopening schools and positions them to better cope with future crises.

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61 This includes addressing concerns such as high repetition rates, waste in procurement, ensuring better distribution and allocation of teachers, making sure teachers are paid transparently and on time. Tackling inefficiencies also requires improving monitoring and financial planning to better track (with real time data rather than the prevailing lags in education spending information) how resources are spent.

62 SDG 17.1: strengthen domestic resource mobilization, including through international support to developing countries to improve domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection.

63 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), “A ‘debt standstill’ for the poorest countries: How much is at stake?”, 27 May 2020, available at <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/a-debt-standstill-for-the-poorest-countries-how-much-is-at-stake-462eabd8/#endnotea0z2>.

64 GEM Report, “Policy Paper 41”, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373844/PDF/373844eng.pdf.multi>.

- **FOCUS ON EQUITY AND INCLUSION:** Measures to “build back resilient” and reach all learners need to understand and address the needs of marginalized groups and ensure they receive quality and full-term education.

Learners in emergencies and protracted crises should be prioritized so that their education is not further jeopardized. School health and nutrition programmes (including school meals, water and sanitation) are of great importance to vulnerable children, as well as a powerful incentive, increasing school reenrolment and attendance (especially of girls and children living in extreme poverty or food insecurity).<sup>65</sup>

Governments and their development partners need to ensure that education systems address the vulnerabilities and needs specific to boys and girls, women and men, and to gender dynamics in times of crisis. Harmful gender norms, combined with economic strains on households, should not prevent girls and the least advantaged learners from returning to school and completing their education.

- **REINFORCE CAPACITIES FOR RISK MANAGEMENT, AT ALL LEVELS OF THE SYSTEM:** Capacities are needed at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels to withstand emergencies. This includes capacity to develop and implement contingency plans, such as alternative education pathways, to mitigate impacts.

The capacities of education stakeholders often need to be strengthened to review and revise existing education sector plans and policies – to include adaptive responses for the COVID-19 crisis. To this end, integrating data on risks and their

impacts into education management and information systems facilitates the design and implementation of crisis-sensitive educational policies and programmes, including disaster preparedness plans.

Education actors at subnational levels need capacities to analyse health risks to learners, teachers, and school staff, and to identify learners at risk of dropping out. Subnational stakeholders also need to be able to assess the coverage and effectiveness of alternative platforms for quality education continuity.

- **ENSURE STRONG LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION:** The multitude of actors needed to respond to and mitigate the impact of crises can lead to duplication, inefficiency, and confusion, in the absence of strong leadership and coordination. National ministry of education leadership of crisis planning and management is important for education resilience. National leadership ensures that humanitarian initiatives are sustainable, aligned with national priorities, and able to mitigate the impact of crises on learners and education communities.

Strong coordination mechanisms are also needed to maximize the inputs of all stakeholders, building on complementarities, including local civil society, to serve the most marginalized.

- **ENHANCE CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION MECHANISMS:** Education directors, teachers, parents and caregivers – all played a critical role in the response to the COVID-19 crisis and took on additional responsibilities in uncharted territories. Engaging these stakeholders can enhance the education system’s resilience. Consultation and communication with all

<sup>65</sup> Karen Mundy and Kerrie Proulx, *Making evaluation work for the achievement of SDG 4 Target 5: Equality and inclusion in education*, UNESCO, NORAD, World Bank Group, UNICEF, 2019, available at [https://www.qcedclearinghouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/190340eng\\_0.pdf](https://www.qcedclearinghouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/190340eng_0.pdf).

education actors – including teachers, learners, and the most marginalized – are key to the effective implementation of plans and responses, to meeting the needs of all learners, and to enhancing their resilience and that of the education system.

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## D. REIMAGINE EDUCATION AND ACCELERATE POSITIVE CHANGE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

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In the face of global closures of educational institutions and the halting of non-formal training, there has been remarkable innovation in responses to support learning and teaching. But responses have also highlighted major divides, beginning with the digital one. Learning losses due to prolonged school closures mean that many educational outcomes are at risk. For a number of reasons, we cannot return to the world as it was before.<sup>66</sup> As we “build back resilient”, we need to ensure that education systems are more flexible, equitable, and inclusive.

The massive efforts made in a short time to respond to the shocks to education systems remind us that changes previously considered difficult or impossible to implement are possible after all. We must seize the opportunity to find new ways to address the learning crisis and bring about a set of sustainable solutions.

➤ **FOCUS ON ADDRESSING LEARNING LOSSES AND PREVENTING DROPOUTS, PARTICULARLY OF MARGINALIZED GROUPS:** At the same time that educational authorities build on the positive – and take heed from the negative – lessons from the crisis revolve

around three priorities: (i) catching up on learning losses, (ii) bringing back to school learners at risk of dropping out, and (iii) focusing on social and emotional welfare of the student population, teachers and staff.

➤ **OFFER SKILLS FOR EMPLOYABILITY**

**PROGRAMMES:** Measures to address these priorities should also fully take into account the necessity of equipping youth and adults with the skills in demand in the labour market. This may require rethinking how these key skills are identified, for both current and future labour markets. Among the many things the crisis has underlined is that the “essential workers who hold the system together”,<sup>67</sup> who provide the most basic social needs and services, need to be supported and reinforced. These include health care workers, caregivers, employees in agro-food and service industries, and of course teachers. Ensuring they receive the support they need will require prioritizing education and training and accelerating changes within education and training.

➤ **SUPPORT THE TEACHING PROFESSION**

**AND TEACHERS’ READINESS:** It is essential that teachers and communities be better prepared and supported if equitable and inclusive learning, in and beyond classrooms, is to be guaranteed. Technology alone cannot guarantee good learning outcomes. More important than training teachers in ICT skills, is ensuring that they have the assessment and pedagogical skills to meet students at their level and to implement the accelerated curricula and differentiated learning strategies likely to emerge in the return to school.

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66 UNESCO, International Commission on the Futures of Education, “Education in a post COVID-19 world: Nine ideas for action”, 2020, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373717/PDF/373717eng.pdf.multi>.

67 United Nations, “Policy Brief: The World of Work and COVID-19”, June 2020, available at [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/the\\_world\\_of\\_work\\_and\\_covid-19.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/the_world_of_work_and_covid-19.pdf).



Digital solutions need relevant content, adequate instructional models, effective teaching practices, and a supportive learning environment. Teacher development and professionalization are key to ensure they are sufficiently qualified, remunerated, and prepared. Governments could also strengthen systems of support for teachers, facilitators, and parents/caregivers in the successful and safe use of technology for learning.

➤ **EXPAND THE DEFINITION OF THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION TO INCLUDE CONNECTIVITY ENTITLEMENT:**

Considerable attention has been given to the use of technology to ensure learning continuity. Those digital solutions to improve teaching and learning which are institutionalized in the aftermath of the pandemic need to put equity and inclusion at their centre, to ensure all children may benefit from them.

Teachers and learners need free and open source technologies for teaching and learning. Quality education cannot be provided through content built outside of the pedagogical space and outside of human relationships between teachers and students. Nor can education be dependent on digital platforms controlled by private companies.<sup>68</sup> Governments could support open educational resources and open digital access.

➤ **REMOVE BARRIERS TO CONNECTIVITY:** The crisis brought a deeper understanding of the digital divide and related equity gaps, which require urgent attention.<sup>69</sup> Governments and development partners need to work together to remove technological barriers by investing in digital infrastructure and lowering

connectivity costs. Bridging the digital divide will also require greater investment in digital literacy for marginalized populations.

At the same time, strongly relying on technology will not on its own bring effective learning for all children, especially the most marginalized. It will be necessary to ensure that as children have better access to the internet, stronger parental support and greater availability of learning materials will enable maximum benefit more from any digital solutions.<sup>70</sup>

Low-tech and no-tech approaches should not be forgotten for those who have limited access to technology. Overall, countries need to plan to ensure children from the poorest households will not continue to be left behind.<sup>71</sup>

➤ **STRENGTHEN DATA AND MONITORING OF LEARNING:**

Managing the education crisis requires a continuous monitoring of data at the student, teacher, and school levels. This monitoring will need to be based on a mix of existing data and assessment systems and potentially new approaches tailored to this specific context. To reinforce resilience, data should help monitor the learning environment, and help assess school accountability. Data quality and timeliness are essential, which implies a complementary strategy that minimizes the digital divide and expands teacher abilities in pedagogical practices for distance education. The strength of the monitoring system in education is as strong as its underlying data, and efforts should be made to help

68 UNESCO, International Commission on the Futures of Education, "Education in a post COVID-19 world: Nine ideas for action", 2020, available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373717/PDF/373717eng.pdf.multi>.

69 World Bank, *The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy responses*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2020.

70 Karen Mundy and Susannah Hares, "Equity-Focused Approaches to Learning Loss during COVID-19", *Center for Global Development Blog*, 16 April 2020, available at <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/equity-focused-approaches-learning-loss-during-covid-19>.

71 Ibid.



schools produce quality data that they can also use, feeding it upstream to allow the continuous monitoring of the system.

- **STRENGTHEN THE ARTICULATION AND FLEXIBILITY ACROSS LEVELS AND TYPES OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING:** An important element of resilient education systems is their flexibility, which relies on strong articulation between levels and types of education, but also the capacity to mobilize alternative modes of delivery. Hybrid learning offering flexible and quasi-individualized learning pathways for learners requires a mix of pedagogies and approaches, and also the mobilization of alternative pedagogical resources from national and international platforms.

But hybrid learning poses challenges to the recognition of learning. With a view to safeguarding integrated systems, stronger linkages should be developed between formal and non-formal structures, including recognition, validation, and accreditation of knowledge and skills acquired through all types of learning. These stronger linkages will allow education systems to become more equitable and inclusive, as well as more effective in fulfilling their mission, more efficient in their operations and use of resources, and better equipped to serve the needs of their communities and society at large.

# IV. Conclusion

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The shock of the COVID-19 crisis on education has been unprecedented. It has set the clock back on the attainment of international education goals, and disproportionately affected the poorer and most vulnerable. And yet, the education community has proved resilient, laying a groundwork for the rebound.

There remains a risk of a downward spiral, in a negative feedback loop of learning loss and exclusion. Yet every negative spiral of aggravating socio-economic circumstances suggests its reverse image of a positive spiral, one which would lead to the future of education

we want: one of inclusive change in education delivery, of unleashing the potential of individuals, and of collective fulfilment, in all areas of life, through education investment.

There is unlimited drive, and untapped resources, we can count on for the restoration, not only of education's essential services, but of its fundamental aspirations. It is the responsibility of governments and the international community to stay true to principles and conduct reforms, so that, not only will the children and youth regain their promised future, but all education stakeholders find their role in making it happen.