

All Means All – How to support learning for the most vulnerable children in areas of school closures

A checklist for UNICEF staff on factors to consider when planning COVID-19 education response¹

The outbreak of the COVID-19 has led to hundreds of millions of children in countries and territories worldwide being affected by school closures aimed at slowing the transmission of the pandemic. This number could grow as more countries take decisions to contain the virus.

To ensure the continuity of children's learning, plans are being solidified in various contexts to find alternative means for children to continue learning during this period. Various remote learning options are being considered and some have already been activated including delivering education through online teaching, digital access to learning materials, teaching through radio and television and distribution of printed learning materials among other options. All these efforts aim at ensuring that learning is not disrupted and to mitigate against the negative effects that are associated with prolonged periods of school closure. Lessons from West Africa, where the Ebola outbreak led to unprecedented negative effects on children due to school closure, provide strong basis to support continued learning at all costs.

While remote learning strategies aim to ensure continued learning for all children, we know that the most marginalized children including those with disabilities, struggling learners, children from ethnic minorities, children on the move (migrant, refugee and internally displaced children), children in the most rural hard-to-reach and poorest communities and girls tasked with caring for ill family members may not be able to access these opportunities. Vulnerabilities may also expand, shift, or multiply during health emergencies. For example, girls may be more susceptible to gender-based violence and be more isolated as their school peer support network shrinks. This may be due to a lack of access to internet, failure to afford required equipment or simply because the modality of delivery may not meet their needs. At the same time in the poorest households where caregivers/parents may have low educational attainment, never experienced distance schooling or themselves have disabilities, they may struggle to support their children's learning. Globally, data shows that the poorest and most marginalized children are missing out on schooling or fare poorly in learning outcomes compared to their counterparts. In emergencies, the situation will be compounded.

Echoing the leading principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to 'leave no one behind,' and SDG 4 that aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,' it is important to ensure that no child is left behind during this period. It is imperative that strategies to support continued learning for children take into consideration the needs of the poorest and most marginalized children. This will ensure that **all** children benefit and are able to continue with their learning.

It is apparent that with remote education, poor and marginalized learners will require special support to access and process content to maximize their learning and allow them to stay at par with their peers. It is important to assess all significant bottlenecks and barriers that mitigate against reaching vulnerable and marginalized children during school closures. In response, programmatic interventions must explicitly seek to mitigate these bottlenecks/barriers. It is important to also monitor whether children from vulnerable groups manage to continue with learning and to what intensity. This will help shape the mitigation strategies that must be put in place to ensure these children are able to catch up when they return to school.

¹ This is a live document and will be continually updated as the situation evolves.

The points below, while not exhaustive, can be used as a checklist to ensure that opportunities for remote learning work for the poorest and most vulnerable children:

- 1. Provision of learning devices/equipment and connectivity:** Where remote learning strategies include provision of learning equipment, e.g. tablets, radios, printed material, it is important to ensure that consideration is made to cover the needs of children who may require specialized equipment to support their learning, including assistive technology and devices for children with disabilities. It is necessary to consider disparities increased by the digital-divide, and to ensure where feasible that adequate internet access is provided in rural areas or that low-tech or alternative modalities of delivery are put in place. For example, radio instruction is a good alternative when schools are closed and when children may not have access to the Internet or e-Learning devices. Also, online safety tips are encouraged, especially considering the children and families with less familiarity to technology/connectivity as they may be more vulnerable to bullying, online scams, exploitation, etc. (including, but not limited to, online sexual exploitation or grooming that leads to other forms of sexual abuse).
- 2. Accessibility of instruction:** All children must access learning regardless of the medium of delivery and for children with disabilities this includes closed captions, live sign language interpretation, large print, visual or audio adaptations of material, etc. Planning of strategies for continued learning during this period must align with universal design for learning to benefit all children. For example, [eKitabu offers Kenya and Rwandan sign language videos and storybooks](#) & [Señas y Sonrisas in Nicaraguan sign](#).
- 3. Language of instruction:** Without advance planning, there may be difficulties in adapting curriculum to a diverse set of mother tongues. However, for remote learning to be relevant and to allow broad participation, mother tongue language provision should be prioritized and implemented where possible. This could include the use of a combination of *sign language, subtitles, and visual cues* where education is delivered through television. Example resources include: [African Storybook](#) offers access to picture storybooks in African languages and [StoryWeaver](#) offers a digital repository of multilingual stories for children.
- 4. Individualized Education Plans (IEP):** Where feasible and as appropriate, children with disabilities should have individualized education plans that identify individual learning goals, adaptations and support required to ensure the child remains on track as per their IEP. As such, it is important to develop plans collaboratively with caregivers/parents regarding a child's IEP services before and during a closure, including contingency plans for any prolonged/future disruptions, and for follow-up communication on next steps once the school reopens.
- 5. Caregivers/parental engagement:** Remote learning requires commitment to attend classes or keep track of learning modules and timetables. Children with disabilities may need support with attending and participating. The reality is that some caregivers/parents may not be in the position to support learning if they are not available due to work, have not completed that level of schooling, are not literate in the language of instruction and/or themselves experiencing a disability. It is important that caregivers/parents are supported with resources and sensitized on how they can support their children's learning during this time, such as the establishment of caregiver/parent-support networks to facilitate support.

- 6. Structure and routine:** While the school provides a structure and routine for learning, home learning does not and can be challenging especially for children with disabilities. Sensitizing caregivers, parents and teachers to set-up a structure and routine is critical to ensure all children's learning is prioritized. [WHO](#) and [UNICEF](#) offer tips for caregivers/parents such as creating a daily routine.
- 7. Psychosocial support, protection and prevention/management of gender-based violence:** Schools provide social environments where children interact and play with their peers. For many children with disabilities, peer relations, social perception and social competence are significant aspects of their IEPs. Being confined at home could have psychosocial impacts. As such, special efforts should be made to provide psychosocial support services via remote learning modalities. In some cases, additional safety risks especially for those who are already vulnerable and/or those who live in households where intimate partner violence and/or child abuse are occurring. Further, girls may face increased protection risks such as increased violence, sexual exploitation and teen pregnancy. Child protection specialists should be engaged and consulted to offer solutions and support on how best to address SGBV risks and safeguarding. Neglect is also an important issue to address – especially in the case of children with disabilities. Often schools have referral mechanisms, but in times of school closures this line of communication is broken. It is important to work with protection and health specialists to disseminate appropriate information, sharing protocols and referral pathways.
- 8. Protection and inclusion of children on the move:** Migrant, refugee and displaced children are already disproportionately affected by learning disruptions and make up a large part of the out-of-school child population. Children on the move are at heightened risks, often living in cramped conditions with limited access to WASH (e.g. immigration detention) and need to be reached with accurate information in a language they understand. Children of labour migrants often live in the most disadvantaged urban areas, where access to essential services is already limited. Children on the move may depend on school lunches and other school or nonformal learning space services. As learning spaces close, consider how to provide not only alternative learning, but also alternative, safe options for hot meals and other vital support for the most vulnerable. Further, the misinformation on the spread of COVID-19 exacerbates the xenophobia and discrimination that migrant and displaced children and their families already face. Growing stigmatization of groups and ethnicities associated with the disease is deeply concerning. All children must be protected from stigma and abuse.
- 9. Communication, sensitization and media campaigns on the value of girls' education:** It is important to support community awareness and sensitization, particularly with community leaders, religious leaders and families, around protecting, upholding and perhaps accelerating girls' time for learning. When girls are out of school, they may experience an increased isolation from key peer support social networks and may be tasked to care for ill relatives, siblings and with household chores. This is especially important for adolescent girls who face the heaviest burden of upholding multiple roles. It is important to address harmful gender norms that may hinder learning opportunities and to instill positive gender norms through communication campaigns during this period - including the shared burden of caregiving in the home, breaking gender digital divides in access to learning devices and skills development, platforms - digital and in-person - to connect adolescent girls for social action and leadership, etc. All plans or programs designed with a gender lens should be inclusive of and accessible to girls with disabilities.

- 10. Learning beyond school curricula:** It is also important to provide communities with ideas and resources for maximizing learning even when not possible to follow the school curricula. For example, children may learn more about their caregiver/parents' skills and trade, or in communities not in lockdown community members and teachers can teach some skills to small groups of children while following social distancing precautions.
- 11. Accelerated education, remedial, and catch-up programmes:** It is known that not all children, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, will continue to access learning during the period of school closure. It is important that education providers, school heads, teachers and school management committees come up with plans to support such children to catch-up when schools resume.
- 12. Build back better:** Recognizing that many vulnerable children may not have been accessing quality and inclusive learning opportunities pre-covid-19, resumption of schooling presents an opportunity to 'build back better' and capitalize on the strategies and resources being put in place during this crisis to increase access and improve learning opportunities for all children. This includes ensuring that learning spaces are accessible to those experiencing physical disabilities, that all children – in particular girls- can access school safely, that there are gender-segregated latrines to encourage girls' attendance, that schools are equipped for children experiencing learning impairments, that teachers are prepared to teach students of all abilities, and that communities and caregivers/parents are actively engaged and participate in the local education system and are well-informed of how to support their children.

Relevant resources

- UNICEF, WHO, IFRC: [Key Messages and Actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools](#)
- UNICEF: [Guidance Including Children with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action \(avail in French, Arabic and accessible formats\)](#)
- UNESCO: [list of educational applications/platforms to help facilitate student learning and provide social caring and interaction](#)
- WHO, OCHA, IFRC 2020, COVID-19: [How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement](#)
- GBV Guidelines: [COVID-19 resources to address gender-based violence risks](#)
- Alliance for CP: [Guidance Note: Protection of Children During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)
- GBV AoR HelpDesk: [AoR's GBV Case Management and the Covid-19 Pandemic](#)
- IASC: [Briefing note on addressing mental health and psychosocial aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak](#)
- UNICEF (internal): [Quick Tips on COVID-19 and Migrant, Refugee and Internally Displaced Children](#)
- UNICEF, WHO, IFRC: [A guide to preventing and addressing social stigma](#)
- UNICEF Voices of Youth: [COVID-19: your voices against stigma and discrimination](#)
- UNICEF 2013, [Take us Seriously: Engaging Children with Disabilities in Decisions Affecting their Lives](#)
- UNICEF [Guidance note on considerations for children and adults with disabilities](#) -This guidance note is also available in English, Spanish, Arabic, Russian and accessible versions EPUB, Braille-ready and accessible HTML formats
- [UNICEF Guidance Note on risk communication and community engagement with children and adults with disabilities](#) - This guidance is also available in EPUB, Braille-ready and accessible HTML formats