

Formative Evaluation of UNICEF's Support to the Education Sector in the Framework of the UNICEF ECA COVID-19 Response Plan

Volume 1 | Final Report





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United Nations Children's Fund
First Floor, UN House, Marine Gardens
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For further information, please contact:

United Nations Children's Fund
First Floor, UN House,
Marine Gardens
Christ Church, Barbados
bridgetown@unicef.org

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Executive Summary	vi
Object of the evaluation	vi
Purpose and objectives of the evaluation	vi
Methodological design	vii
Key findings	vii
Conclusions	ix
Recommendations	x
1. Introduction, Background and Context.....	1
1.1 Introduction	2
1.2 Background and context	3
1.3 Socio-economic status	3
1.4 Socio-political context	4
1.5 State of migration	5
1.6 Environmental factors affecting the subregion	5
1.7 The impact of COVID-19 in the ECA.....	7
1.8 COVID-19 and its impact on children's education in the ECA	8
1.9 UNICEF's COVID-19 Response Plan	11
2. Object of the Evaluation	12
2.1 Target countries	13
2.2 Target groups	13
2.3 COVID-19 Response Plan and UNICEF Programme Budget Overview	14
Education Sector (2020-2022)	14
2.4 Theory of Change (ToC)	16
3. Purpose of the Evaluation	18
4. Objectives of the Evaluation	20
5. Evaluation Use and Users	22
6. Scope of the Evaluation.....	24
7. Evaluation Criteria, Evaluation Questions and Framework	27
7.1 Evaluation criteria	28
7.2 Evaluation questions and framework	28
8. Methodology	30
8.1 Methodological design	31
8.2 Evaluation norms and ethical considerations	36
9. Findings.....	37
9.1 Relevance: To what extent was UNICEF's education response	38
relevant? (Did it do the right thing?)	38
9.2 Coherence: To what extent was UNICEF's COVID-19 response in education coherent (internally and externally)? (How well did it fit?)	40
9.3 Effectiveness: To what extent was UNICEF's COVID-19 respons in education effective in delivering its targeted actions according to plan? (Did it achieve its objectives?)	43
9.4 Sustainability: To what extent can UNICEF's support during	56
COVID-19 be sustained? (Will the benefits last?)	56
Conclusions	63
Lessons Learned	65
Recommendations	67

List of Figures

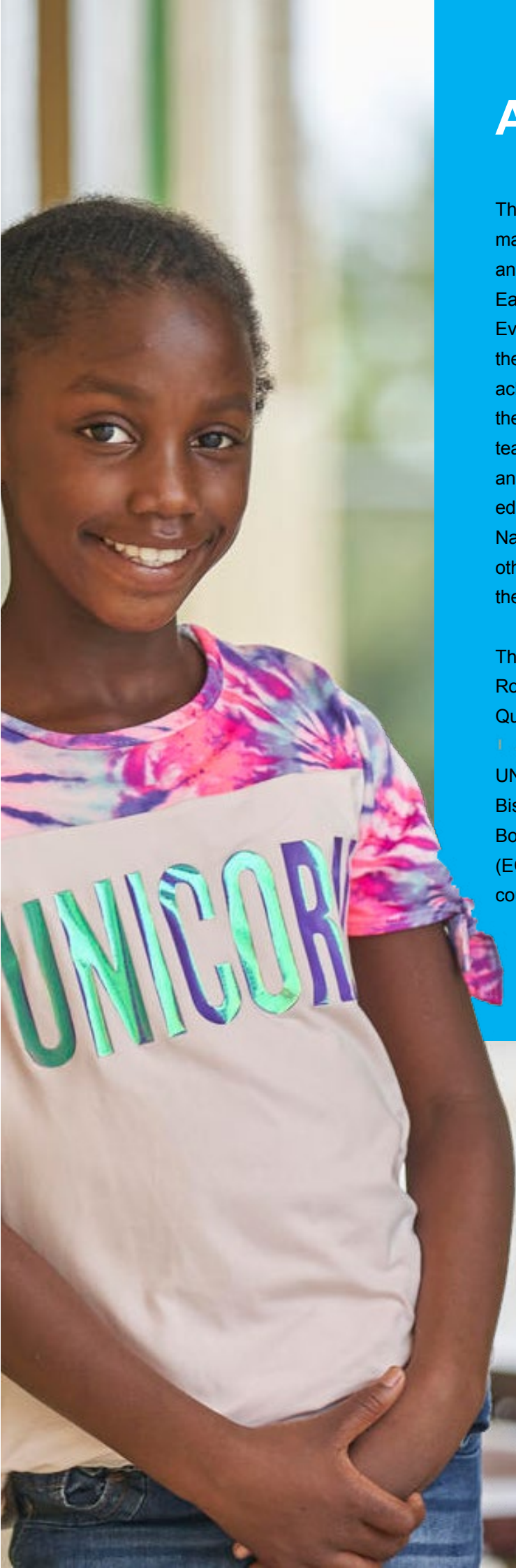
Figure 1 - Map of ECA countries and territories	3
Figure 2 - Cumulative confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths.....	6
Figure 3 - Cumulative confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths per million people	7
Figure 4 - Total funding allocation per year	14
Figure 5 - Total cash transfers budget (USD), per output/intervention, 2020-2022	15
Figure 6 - Theory of Change (ToC).....	17
Figure 7 - Stakeholder influence and interest map.....	23
Figure 8 - Summary of data collection.....	33
Figure 9 - Key challenges in the education sector during and after the COVID-19 pandemic	52
Figure 10 - Extent to which vulnerable groups were prioritised during the COVID-19 pandemic	54
Figure 11 - Key areas where digital learning supports and enhances face-to-face education for long-term sustainability.....	61
Figure 12 - Perceptions on whether online classes should continue	61

List of Tables

Table 1 - Number of children enrolled in schools in ECA countries/territories	8
Table 2 - Target groups and related targets.....	13
Table 3 - ECA countries and territories within the scope of the evaluation.....	26
Table 4 - Reformulated evaluation questions and sub-questions.....	29
Table 5 - Number of survey respondents by category and gender.....	32
Table 6 - Number of survey respondents by category and country	32
Table 7 - Number of KIIs conducted by group	32
Table 8 - Number of FGD participants by category	33
Table 9 - UNICEF indicators data set, 2020-2022	34
Table 10 - HPM indicators achieved in 2020-2021 education targets	45
Table 11 - Key achievements in Early Childhood Development (ECD) support (2020-2022).....	47
Table 12 - Key achievements in primary and secondary education support (2020-2022).....	50

List of Boxes

Box 1 - Key results for ECD interventions	46
Box 2 - Key results for primary and secondary school interventions.....	49
Box 3 - Key results from interventions targeting the most disadvantaged children.....	55



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This evaluation was conducted by HeathGen Limited: Dr. Robina Shaheen (Team Leader), Geraldina Villalobos Quezada, Michelle Ferreira Brito, and Jaevion Nelson.

UNICEF Evaluation Managers include Stephanie Bishop, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, and Patrice Bosso, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist (ECA), with support from Carlos Rodriguez-Ariza, Multi-country Evaluation Specialist (LACRO).

Acronyms

3G	Third-Generation Wireless Mobile Network
ARP	Academic Recovery Programme
CAF	Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean
CAPRI	Caribbean Policy Research Institute
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CCD	Care for Child Development
CDEMA	Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency
CISEL	Caribbean Institute of Social and Emotional Learning
CITI	Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
COAR	Country Office Annual Report
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSI	Core Strategic Indicators
CSS	Caribbean Small States
CSSI	Caribbean Safe School Initiative
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
ECA	Eastern Caribbean Area
ECCE	Early Child Care Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EiE	Education in Emergencies
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ET	Evaluation Team
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN
FDG	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEROS	Global Evaluation Reports Oversight System
HAC	Humanitarian Action for Children
HFLE	Health and Family Life Education
HML	Humanitarian Media Lab. Inc
HPM	Human Performance Monitoring
ICT	Information and Communication Technology



ILO	International Labour Organization
IPC	Infection Prevention and Control
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
KII	Key Informant Interview
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
LACRO	Latin American and the Caribbean Regional Office
LWC	Living Water Community
MCP	Multi-Country Programme
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRP	(COVID-19) Multi-Sectoral Response Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - Development Assistance Committee
OECS	Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States
OER	Open Educational Resources
PAHO	Pan American Health Organization
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RAM	Results Assessment Module
RCCE	Risk Communication and Community Engagement
SBC	Social and Behaviour Change
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEL	Social Emotional Learning
SEN	Special Educational Needs
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization





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Executive Summary

Object of the evaluation

The object of the evaluation was the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)'s education response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in the Eastern Caribbean Area (ECA), implemented between 2020 and 2022. This was part of the COVID-19 Response Plan (2020-2021) through which UNICEF supported government institutions with resource mobilisation, technical assistance, and service delivery. Efforts focused on four key areas: device provision, connectivity, learning content development, and teacher capacity building.

In 2022, UNICEF entered its sixth programme cycle, and all programmatic efforts were under the COVID-19 response. Building on efforts from 2020-2021, in 2022 UNICEF continued to support safe school operations, digital learning, curriculum recovery, and psychosocial well-being. The Response Plan targeted 12 ECA countries/territories: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, and Turks and Caicos Islands. Within these countries/territories, UNICEF targeted up to 1 million people (including primary and secondary school children, parents/caregivers, community members, and educational professionals). The COVID-19 Response Plan began with a funding appeal of US\$9.2 million,¹ and a total of \$1.1 million was mobilised. From 2020 to 2022, a total of US\$5,375,393 was allocated to the education programme.

Purpose and objectives of the evaluation

This was a formative evaluation with a learning focus. It specifically aimed to demonstrate best practices for the continuity of education during a disaster/emergency and generate evidence to inform the Transforming Education agenda within the ECA region as a key priority under the Multi-Country Programme (MCP) 2022-2026. The primary objectives of the evaluation were:

- To assess the coherence, relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of UNICEF's response to COVID-19 within the education sector.
- To ascertain results achieved, including addressing disparities and inequities; and identify the most effective implementation strategies and partnerships for UNICEF to adopt for the implementation of the Transforming Education agenda.

Evaluation use and users

Based on the stakeholder mapping, there were primary and secondary; internal and external; and regional and national level stakeholders. The primary users are UNICEF ECA and the governments of the ECA region, particularly Ministries of Education (MoEs) and other related ministry departments involved in the COVID-19 response. Secondary users included the UNICEF Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office (LACRO), national and regional development partners such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), donors, parents, caregivers, and students.

The time scope of the evaluation was April 2020 to December 2022, and the geographical scope included all 12 ECA countries/territories. Of these, seven focus countries/territories were selected for more in-depth data collection, including two deep dive countries: Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados. The target groups include children (including migrants and those with disabilities) and those living in humanitarian and emergency contexts, as well as school principals and teachers.

The evaluation assessed the response against the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) criteria to determine the extent to which it was relevant, effective, coherent, and sustainable; addressing four high-level evaluation questions and 14 sub questions.

Methodological design

The evaluation methodology used a theory-based approach, a non-experimental design, and mixed methods, combining quantitative and qualitative alongside secondary data analysis. Methods included: desk reviews of key documents (50); key informant interviews with UNICEF, government, implementing partners, and other UN agencies (35; 23 female, and 14 male); and three online surveys via SurveyMonkey, gathering a total of 97 responses (79 female, 16 male and 2 from individuals who did not indicate their gender). The surveys were targeted, respectively, at government staff across 12 ECA countries; education professionals and parents; and students. A total of 12 FGDs were conducted, (71 participants), which included students, parents, teachers, education managers, and supervisors. The data analysis used thematic analysis and descriptive statistical methods.

The evaluation was guided by the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) norms and standards for evaluation, and UNICEF's evaluation policy and procedures, such as the Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis and Global Evaluation Reports Oversight System (GEROS) review criteria.

Key limitations encountered included a lack of participation from certain key groups, such as parents and students, respondents unable to recall the support provided due to the long period between the response and this evaluation, and the unavailability of government staff involved in the response due to staff turnover or retirement, which affected institutional memory.

Key findings

Relevance

UNICEF's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was highly relevant. The design was highly participatory to support joint COVID-19 preparation and response mechanisms and plans. This participatory approach was facilitated by both UNICEF and MoEs² engaging through working groups. The response addressed, to a large extent, the evolving needs and priorities of governments in relation to the different phases of the pandemic, as

² According to UNICEF staff and external stakeholders.

well as the differing demands and needs of ECA countries/territories and affected populations. The response was developed in close coordination and collaboration with MoEs, health authorities, and other implementing partners, and alignment with the UN Sub-Regional Multisectoral Response Plan for the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Coherence

UNICEF demonstrated strong external coherence in its COVID-19 education response across the region, characterised by joint working for complementarity, alignment with partners, and avoiding duplication. By establishing partnerships with regional bodies, governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and donors, UNICEF facilitated evidence-based solutions that addressed immediate challenges in the education sector while also setting in motion models that would affect the ways that schools enhance the use of technology to complement traditional modes of teaching in the long term. Strong external coherence was evident at design stage through co-designing strategies with, for example, the OECS, complementing partners' technical and financial resources. UNICEF's strong ability to bring in partners and experts to help with specific projects and initiatives was highly acknowledged, for example, for updating teacher training curricula with distance learning content. Whilst there was close working across some UNICEF sections to deliver joint interventions, many of the teams continued to work in silos due to the absence of a strong focus on institutional coordination across programme teams.

Effectiveness

Overall, UNICEF made strong progress in meeting its objectives under the Response Plan, though not all targets were fully achieved, as reflected in the Humanitarian Performance Monitoring (HPM) data. UNICEF provided strong and wide-ranging support to the education sector throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and most interventions were delivered in close collaboration with governments and partners to ensure learning continuity, both during school closures and in the safe reopening of schools. Efforts included capacity building and system-level support to strengthen infrastructure, and to enhance the knowledge and skills of personnel across early childhood, primary, and secondary levels. This was achieved through the expansion of online and, later, hybrid education modalities. Key achievements, despite operational and structural challenges, included the enhancement of digital education, investments in emergency preparedness, support for continuity of learning, prioritisation of psychosocial support, and targeted assistance to the most vulnerable. While UNICEF aimed to reach disadvantaged students, including girls, migrant children, and children with disabilities, gaps remained, and the lack of disaggregated data limited the ability to fully assess the achievement of results for these groups of children.

Sustainability

UNICEF's COVID-19 education response evolved from an emergency-driven approach to one increasingly focused on sustainability. While initial efforts prioritised urgent needs, longer-term considerations were progressively integrated, particularly through using digital learning, though this was later complemented with face-to-face teaching, teacher training, and various resilience measures. Initiatives such as Giga, NotesMaster, and support for hybrid learning, aimed to embed systemic change, and some governments have incorporated these into national strategies. However, implementation has varied across countries, and many stakeholders remain uncertain about the extent to which many aspects will be institutionalised. Although digital learning centres, mental health programmes, and hygiene protocols have been integrated to some extent, challenges such as short-term funding cycles, fragmented ICT planning and structures, and limited government capacity continue to undermine the sustainability of efforts.

Conclusions

Relevance

UNICEF engaged in a highly participatory way with ECA governments. Using its already close working relationship, ensured it understood their evolving needs and was able to provide support accordingly across the various phases of the pandemic. While it was not possible to undertake detailed needs assessments or analysis to inform the response and make it aligned more specifically to the needs of most vulnerable children (although efforts were made to provide for their needs), these could have been done soon after to ensure further alignment with needs. This would have been an early opportunity to start advocating to governments for commitments to put in place post-COVID-19 infrastructures related to, for example, digital learning. Further studies could have helped to identify the future needs of the cohorts whose education has suffered, including by learning loss, and to provide support in future interventions.

Coherence

UNICEF established strong partnerships with governments, NGOs, UN organisations, and regional entities from the onset of the pandemic, and continued to build upon them, which resulted in a stronger response, enabling greater reach and swifter resource mobilisation, which otherwise may not have been possible. This is testimony to UNICEF's positioning as a credible entity with the ability to bring together partners in order to achieve implementation at scale. Working in partnership, UNICEF has demonstrated its added value by focusing on targeted interventions and key strategies, including technical support. Cross-team joint working enabled the education team to leverage on interventions by other sections, which was a good strategy considering the scale of the pandemic and the response required. The fact that many of the teams continued to work in silos may have led to missed opportunities, including putting in place a strong focus on institutional coordination across programme teams for the benefit of a joint response.

Effectiveness

While not all targets under the Response Plan were fully met, UNICEF's achievements are commendable given the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Availability of disaggregated data could have enabled UNICEF to identify, early on, progress and challenges experienced by the most vulnerable children, teachers and parents. Scaling up psychosocial support services and integrating mental health programmes proved essential in addressing stress and anxiety among students and teachers, but a lack of understanding of the challenges faced by parents, and possible support for them, was a missed opportunity and an aspect to consider in future emergency responses. Policies that embed psychosocial programmes into schools to address emotional well-being during crises will be crucial, as well as policy reforms to address administrative and legal barriers facing migrant children to ensure no child is excluded from education, particularly in emergencies.

Sustainability

It is understandable that the design stage of the COVID-19 education response was not able to account for sustainability, given that the pandemic demanded immediate action, and it was right to prioritise this. Nevertheless, measures that were progressively introduced—namely remote and then blended learning—have tremendous potential for long term sustainability, and for ensuring that education systems are more resilient to future emergencies and capable of ensuring learning continuity. This, however, can only be possible if challenges such as funding constraints within governments, internet and digital infrastructure limitations, and government commitment are addressed, otherwise the ability for education systems to respond to future emergencies may again be restricted and disruptions will affect education continuity resulting in learning loss. Furthermore, while it was not possible to include sustainability into plans for this at the start of the pandemic, UNICEF could have used its influence to advocate earlier for increased commitment from government for building digital infrastructure.

Recommendations

- **Schedule timely evaluations:** Commission evaluations immediately after the interventions to increase utility and learning. For course correction, undertake light touch reviews during the response which would inform the evaluations as well as required adaptations within the ongoing response.
- **Promote and support expanding access to digital learning and stronger digital infrastructure:** Using advocacy and technical assistance support, strengthen policy and funding commitments, and national education frameworks, to ensure the education sector maximises the gains made during the pandemic from use of digital learning.
- **Support development of contingency plans for education disruptions** by incorporating hybrid and alternative learning solutions. This will require advocating for funding to rebuild schools and maintain digital learning continuity after disasters. In addition, it will require developing technology-based disaster preparedness strategies to minimise educational disruptions.
- **Promote inclusive education for marginalised children, including those with special educational needs (SEN),** by developing targeted interventions that integrate assistive technologies and inclusive learning materials, as well as establishing long-term frameworks to institutionalise inclusive education policies and training programmes.
- **Improve data-driven decision-making and programme monitoring** by enhancing data collection systems to track education outcomes, particularly for marginalised groups, including strengthening monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess programme effectiveness and guide policy adjustments. In addition, promote cross-sector collaboration to integrate education data into broader social policy frameworks.
- **Support institutionalisation of mental health and psychosocial support in education systems.** Expand the integration of mental health and psychosocial support into school programmes, including teacher training and student counselling services. This includes developing child-friendly and culturally relevant mental health resources for students and educators and embedding mental health support as a core component of national education frameworks. In addition, identify assistance for parents, and support interventions in this area.

1

Introduction, Background and Context



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1.1 Introduction

The UNICEF Office for the ECA's COVID-19 Response Plan (2020-2021) was implemented across the subregion, including within the education sector, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2024, UNICEF ECA commissioned HealthGen Limited to conduct an independent evaluation of the education response within the context of the Response Plan. The evaluation is formative in nature and predominantly serves to inform evidence-based decision-making and advocacy while contributing to learning from best practices for future response plans among UNICEF sectors, national governments, and implementing partners. Moreover, from an accountability perspective, the evidence is intended to present achievements that could be used to influence future funding decisions.

The evaluation was conducted from March 2024 to February 2025. It was carried out largely as designed at the inception phase, and without significant departures from the Terms of Reference (ToR). The inception phase, conducted from March to May 2024, involved an initial desk review and remote interviews with UNICEF's education section team, selected partners, and personnel from ministries, as well as the preparation of an inception report. The inception report included the key elements of the evaluation design, methodology and evaluation framework, which were elaborated based on the key evaluation questions as stated in the ToR and the reconstructed Theory of Change (ToC). The remote data collection took place from August to December 2024, and in-person data collection took place in January 2025. For the field mission, the evaluation team visited two countries, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados. They conducted interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with key informants from the selected schools, ministries of education, education staff, students, teachers, and parents. In addition, perception surveys were administered across the ECA for government staff, students, teachers, and parents/caregivers. The analysis, synthesis and reporting phase took place over the period from January to March 2025.



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1.2 Background and context

The Eastern Caribbean Area (ECA) comprises eight (8) independent states (Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago) and four (4) overseas territories (Anguilla, British Virgin Islands, Montserrat and the Turks and Caicos Islands), as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Map of ECA countries and territories



Source: UNICEF, 2020.

The ECA has a combined population of 2.3 million. Trinidad and Tobago is the most populous country, with 1.3 million residents, while Montserrat has the smallest population, with just under 4,386 people (see Annex Table 1). Children account for 26 percent of the ECA's population, while adolescents and youth represent 23 percent of the population (approximately 529,000 people).³ The population density in the Eastern Caribbean varies significantly across its many islands, but Barbados is one of the most densely populated islands in the Caribbean, with a density of about 660 people per square kilometre.⁴

1.3 Socio-economic status

The COVID-19 crisis has intensified socio-economic disparities across the Caribbean, further destabilising economies that are heavily reliant on tourism and commodity exports and deepening existing vulnerabilities among low-income households. The Gini Coefficient, which measures income inequality, shows a range of inequality levels across the subregion. For many countries in the region, the Gini Coefficient ranges between 0.3 and 0.4, signifying moderate inequality (see Annex Table 1). Recent data show that 33 percent of children in the ECA live in poverty, and 4 percent in extreme poverty, with many from female-headed, migrant households. Caribbean economies were hit by a dual shock during the pandemic: domestic lockdown measures alongside

³ UNICEF ECA, 2020.

⁴ UNFPA, 2017

sharp external declines in tourism and commodity demand. For small island economies that depend heavily on international travel, the consequences were immediate and profound. Countries like The Bahamas and Barbados—where tourism accounts for over a third of gross domestic product (GDP) and employment—saw activity in the sector nearly collapse. Under high-impact scenarios, GDP contractions reached up to 10 percentage points, triggering widespread job losses, particularly in face-to-face service sectors.⁵

Informal workers were among the most severely affected. With little to no employment protection and limited access to public support, their livelihoods vanished overnight. Women, already overrepresented in informal and service roles, faced compounded risks—both economically and socially—as caregiving burdens increased and income opportunities dwindled.

Remittances, a vital financial inflow for many Caribbean households, also came under threat. With rising unemployment in key host countries such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, families reliant on money sent from abroad faced significant uncertainty.⁶

Compounding the crisis was the limited fiscal space in many Caribbean countries. Most ECA countries experienced further increases in public debt, averaging 82 percent of GDP in 2022.⁷ Several countries maintained high public debt-to-GDP ratios, including Antigua and Barbuda at 102 percent, Barbados at 126 percent, Dominica at 106 percent, St. Lucia at 94 percent, and Trinidad and Tobago at 72 percent.⁸

Years of high public debt and low savings left governments with few options. Budget execution rates across key social sectors very poor, with significant underspending in ministries⁹ that benefit children, suggesting broader public finance management issues.¹⁰ While some countries, such as Trinidad and Tobago, had stabilisation funds to cushion the shock, most had to stretch already tight budgets. This constrained their ability to implement broad safety nets or countercyclical spending to support families and protect jobs. At the same time, external supply chain disruptions created risks for food security and access to essential goods. Most CARICOM countries import over 60 percent of their food, and several exceed 80 percent. With reduced foreign exchange inflows and rising global volatility, these countries became increasingly vulnerable to both price shocks and shortages. In this context, the crisis has starkly highlighted how interconnected risks—public health, economic, and social—can reverberate across sectors and deepen inequality.¹¹

1.4 Socio-political context

During the COVID-19 pandemic, countries in the ECA, like many others in the region, faced the critical decision of whether to conduct or postpone national elections. Between March 2020 and June 2022, 10 out of 12 Commonwealth Caribbean countries held elections, despite the public health and logistical challenges posed by the crisis.¹²

Within the ECA, several elections were held during this period. In 2020, St. Kitts and Nevis held elections in June, followed by Trinidad and Tobago in August, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines in November.

5 UNICEF ECA, 2019.

6 Ribes et al., 2020; UN Barbados & the Eastern Caribbean, 2021.

7 Ribes et al., 2020.

8 UNICEF ECA, 2022.

9 An analysis done by UNICEF based on national budget briefs produced in 2021 from 2020 data for select Eastern Caribbean countries and territories.

10 UNICEF ECA, 2022.

11 IBD 2020.

12 Vasciannie, L., 2022.

These elections took place at a time when there were still high levels of uncertainty about the virus, limited international travel, and little precedent for how to safely manage electoral processes during a pandemic. By 2021, countries had begun to adapt to the 'new normal', with a better understanding of health protocols and growing access to vaccines. St. Lucia held its elections in July 2021, followed by The Bahamas in September of the same year. In 2022, two additional countries in the subregion held elections: Barbados held a snap election in January, just one year after transitioning to a republic, and in June, Grenada held its own general election.¹³

1.5 State of migration¹⁴

Immigrants represent more than 10 percent of the population in some territories, while in others, such as Antigua and Barbuda, it stands at around 30 percent.¹⁵ Grenada and Trinidad and Tobago have the highest number of immigrants in the ECA. Most immigrants to the region are intraregional, especially from Venezuela, due to its political, economic, and humanitarian crisis. A high proportion of native-born citizens in all Caribbean countries emigrate elsewhere. In some territories, the number of emigrants as a percentage of the in-country population exceeds 50 percent: in Dominica, the number of emigrants exceeds the resident population by 109 percent.¹⁶ Both emigration and immigration are crucial factors that influence the socio-economic dynamics of the ECA subregion, affecting labour markets, remittance flows, and demographic structures, which impacts the overall development and stability of these nations (see Annex Table 2). During the pandemic, remittances to Latin American and Caribbean countries were estimated to have declined by 7 percent in 2020 compared to 2019—a small drop, but one with significant economic implications for a region highly dependent on money sent by family and friends working abroad.¹⁷ In 2021, remittances grew compared to the same period in 2020.¹⁸

1.6 Environmental factors affecting the subregion

ECA is highly affected by environmental factors, including strong weather systems, powerful hurricanes, longer dry seasons, and shorter wet seasons. Looking across the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region, the Caribbean region is the most severely affected by storms, followed by Central America and South America. Despite having only 6 percent of the region's population, the Caribbean accounts for the most people affected by storms (30.5 million out of 50 million), people left homeless because of storms (483,000 out of 910,000), and storm-related deaths (5,500 out of 9,500)¹⁹ (see Annex Figure 1). These factors are compounded by violence, inequities, natural disasters, and environmental degradation, which have made the ECA a particularly challenging environment for children to grow up in. This context has deepened existing vulnerabilities, disrupted education, and increased health and safety risks for young people across the subregion. During the pandemic, the subregion also faced a challenging hurricane season, which runs from June to November each year, and to make matters worse, in early April 2020, the La Soufrière volcano erupted in St. Vincent. These overlapping crises have increased barriers to accessing health services, especially for the poorest, who often rely on informal jobs and face high levels of food insecurity.

¹³ Vasciannie, L., 2022.

¹⁴ A migrant is an umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. An immigrant, from the perspective of the country of arrival, is a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence. Source: IOM Key Migration terms. Available at: <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>. Accessed in July 2024.

¹⁵ Jaupart, 2023.

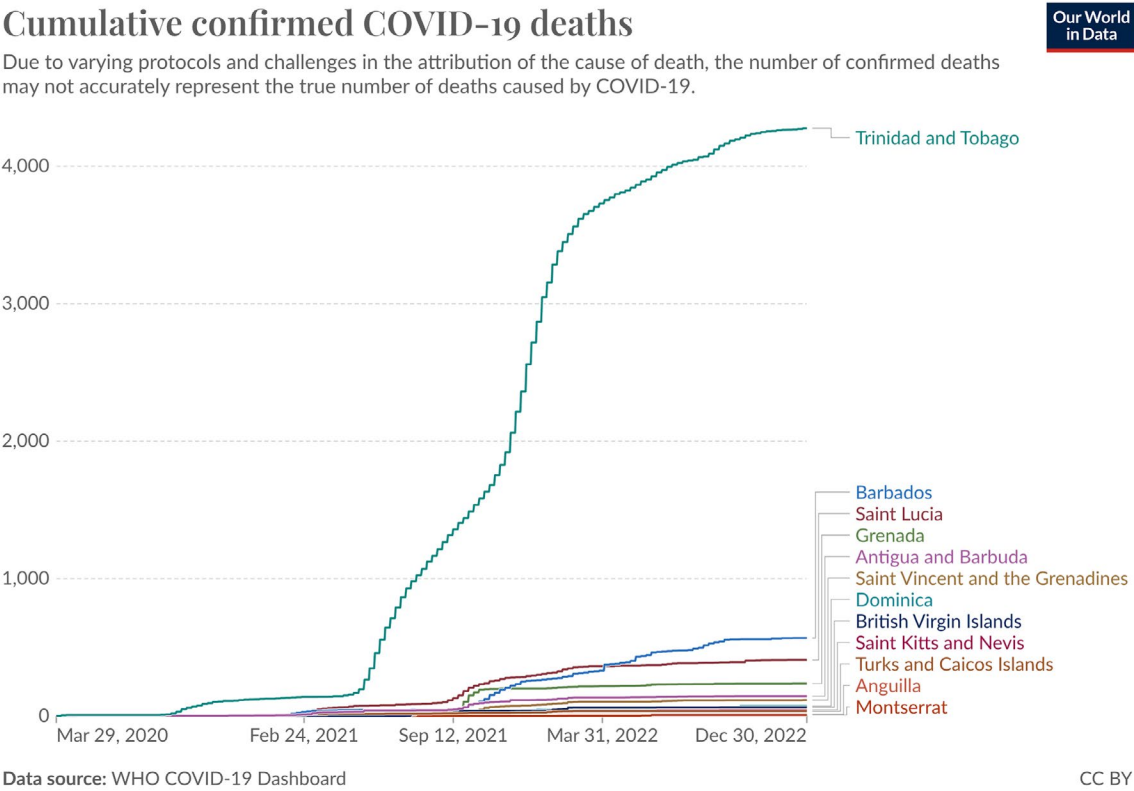
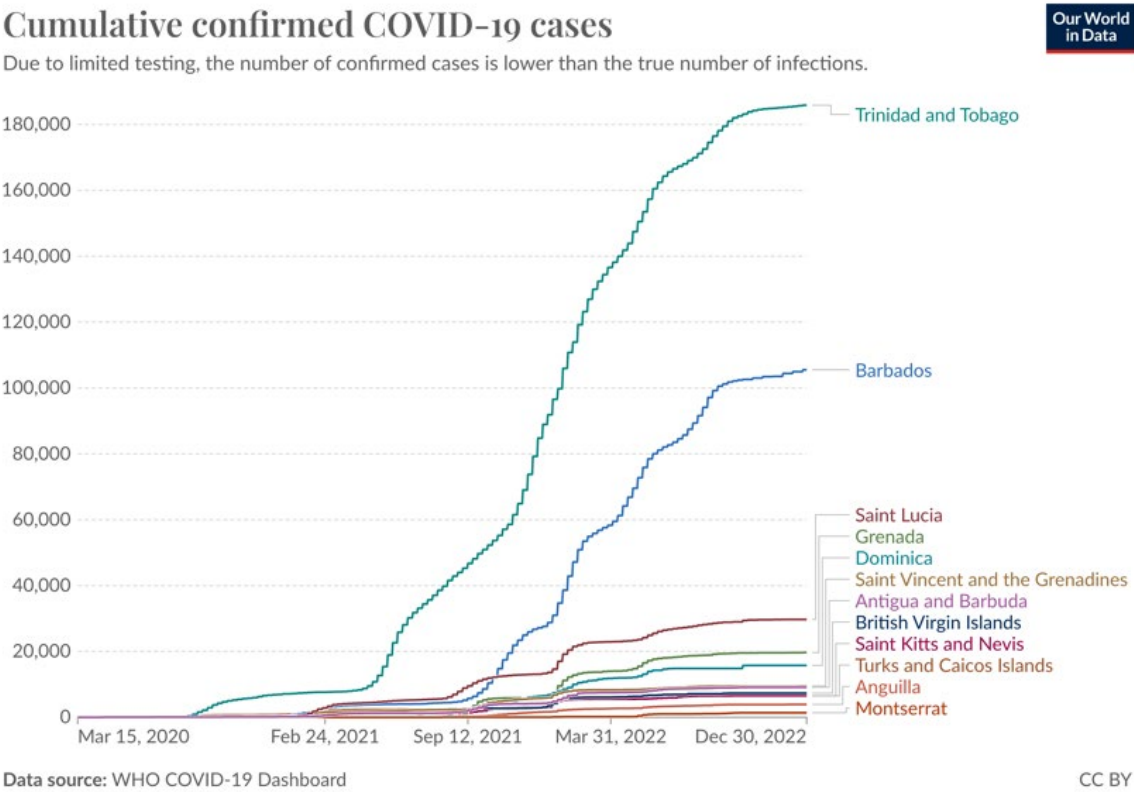
¹⁶ Jaupart, 2023.

¹⁷ The Dialogue, 2020

¹⁸ Maldonado, R., & Harris, J., 2022

¹⁹ OCHA & UNDRR, 2023.

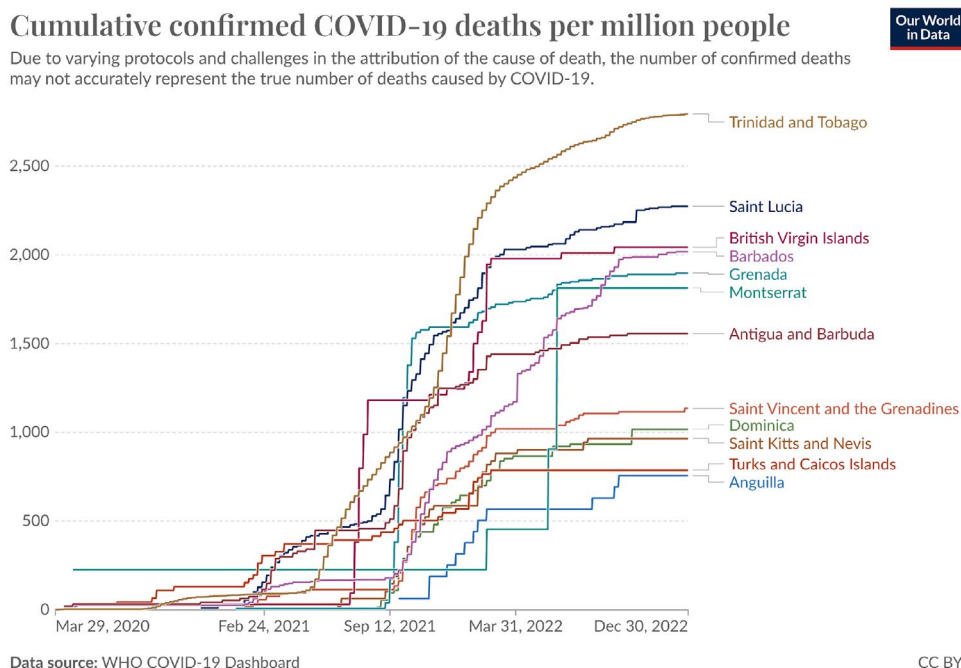
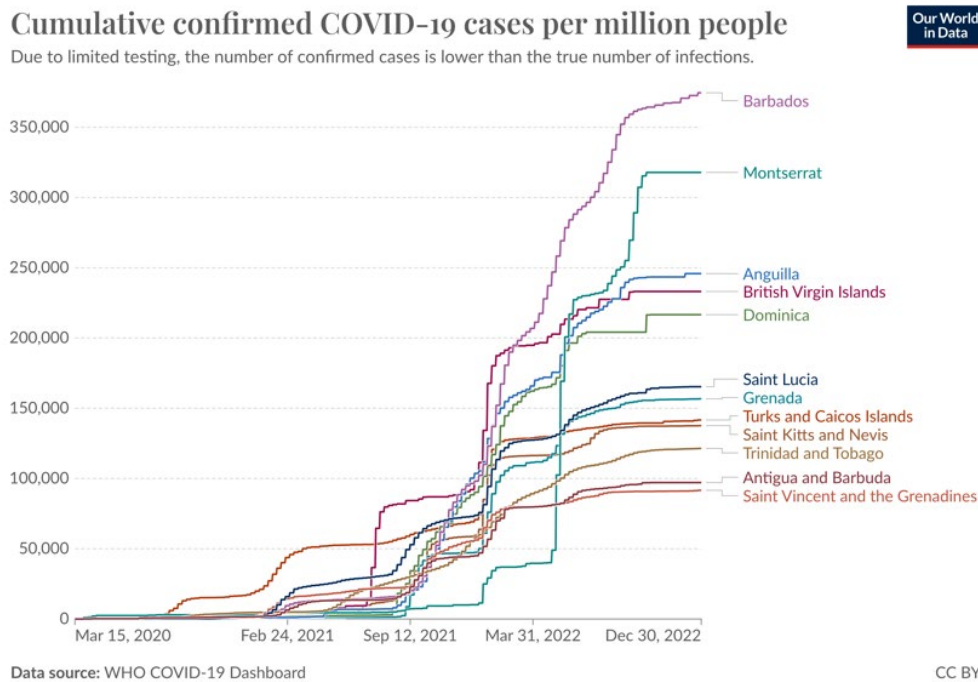
Figure 2 - Cumulative confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths



1.7 The impact of COVID-19 in the ECA

The first COVID-19 cases were recorded in the ECA in March 2020. The subregion managed to maintain relatively low levels of COVID-19 infections overall despite occasional surges, especially in 2022, due to the more infectious Omicron variant. Following the first confirmed case in March 2020, the subregion recorded approximately 400,845 cases, 5,996 deaths, and 1.25 million people vaccinated (approximately 50 percent of the ECA population) by the end of December 2022 (see Figures 2 and 3). The pandemic exacerbated deep-rooted inequalities and pushed hundreds of families further into poverty,²⁰ as well as affecting tourism, education, the economy, and social and cultural life as mentioned in previous subsections.

Figure 3 - Cumulative confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths per million people



20 UNICEF ECA, 2020.

Measures implemented to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in the ECA, and the wider Caribbean region included border closures, the implementation of isolation protocols, and the closure of schools and non-essential businesses. Lockdowns and curfews were used to restrict movement and enforce social distancing. Remote working was adopted for government employees as well as across the private sector and NGOs. Additional measures included complying with quarantine requirements, adhering to physical distancing mandates, and implementing port closures. Despite adopting these regulations, the ECA faced significant challenges in enforcing strict containment measures due to high levels of informal employment, which were exacerbated by challenges in the healthcare system across the ECA, as well as the limited availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) and vaccines, which were often outside the control of governments in the subregion.

1.8 COVID-19 and its impact on children's education in the ECA

Globally, it was estimated that the COVID-19 pandemic may have reduced children's reading progress by about 30 percent and their growth in mathematics by 50 percent. These losses are attributed to school closures, differences in access to remote learning options and the typical two to three months of learning loss associated with the regular summer break.²¹ In the ECA, all countries and territories experienced some level of school closure between March and September 2020, due to the pandemic. The temporary closure of all educational facilities in the ECA affected nearly half a million children (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Number of children enrolled in schools in ECA countries/territories

Country	Countries Grouping	Preschool 3-4 years	Primary 5-11 years	Secondary 12-16 years	Total 3-16 years	Total enrolment rate, primary %*
Anguilla	UK Overseas Territories	460	1,389	1,257	3,106	96.34
Antigua and Barbuda	Leeward Islands (Independent)	3,383	9,771	7,838	20,992	99.74
Barbados	Large Islands	5,711	20,148	20,370	46,229	93.17
British Virgin Islands	UK Overseas Territories	1,408	3,290	2,056	6,754	98.99
Dominica	Windward Islands	1,601	7,385	5,553	14,539	88.08
Grenada	Windward Islands	4,970	11,836	9,185	25,991	78.24
Montserrat	UK Overseas Territories	160	477	349	986	95.80
St. Lucia	Windward Islands	5,080	16,616	12,694	34,390	97.91
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	Windward Islands	2,243	5,452	4,175	11,870	98.32
St. Kitts and Nevis	Leeward Islands (Independent)	3,487	13,173	10,117	26,777	98.70
Trinidad and Tobago	Large Islands	94 075	127 900	81,471	303 446	-
Turks and Caicos Islands	UK Overseas Territories	2,444	2,858	2,099	7,401	94.36

Sources: OECS Statistical Digest 2016-2017; Turks and Caicos Islands Education Digest 2016/2017; Statistics on Education in Barbados 2015- 2016; Government of Anguilla, Department of Education, End of Year Report 2014-2015; Trinidad and Tobago Education Statistics Return 2015/2016 and UNICEF estimates. Note: Data in blue is based on population census estimates (not school enrolment) and, therefore, somewhat overestimated for actual enrolment.

Extended school closures forced governments to implement remote learning in order to maintain continuity in education. There was a significant increase in the use of virtual platforms for teaching and learning, combined with strategies for delivering printed materials for use at home, the use of media (television and radio), and

online digital solutions (applications).²² Each country's use of remote learning measures to deliver education faced several limitations. Internet connectivity was a major challenge, as it was integral to their ability to deliver remote learning solutions, but they also faced challenges related to access to devices, implementation of the response strategy, teachers' preparedness, and institutional constraints.²³

Students' limited access to the internet and digital devices was a serious impediment to remote learning. The cost of internet connectivity and the penetration of internet access varied across the ECA and within the countries, highlighting a significant digital divide that negatively affected teachers' capacity to consistently deliver quality instruction through virtual and blended modalities.²⁴ For example, by 2019, around 40 per cent of the Caribbean Small States²⁵ population still lacked internet access, and affordability was an issue even for those who were connected. The region also lagged in digitising public services,²⁶ which created problems in facilitating administrative and online education activities.

Some countries provided additional support to children to ensure the continuation of education during the pandemic, including distributing devices (tablets) to those in need and increased broadcasting of classes on television and radio. They also built the capacity of teachers and school leaders²⁷ to use remote learning effectively for lesson delivery. These efforts aimed to bridge the digital divide and maintain educational access despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.²⁸

Although more than half of Caribbean countries and territories reopened their schools in September 2020, almost all ECA countries and territories subsequently had to close them again, either partially or fully. From May 2021 to March 2022, the situation across the Caribbean remained mixed, with online or blended taking place (see Annex Table 3).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the start of the last quarter of the 2019/2020 school year in the ECA (April to June), leading to exams being postponed or cancelled, which held back children transitioning from primary to secondary school, and from secondary school to tertiary education. It also delayed children's transition from pre-primary to primary school.²⁹ The damage and learning loss caused by the pandemic is becoming evident now through national learning assessments.

The impact of COVID-19 on children extends beyond disruption in their education. It has affected their safety, security, mental health, and overall well-being, and it has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities. These effects have been particularly severe for disadvantaged children and their families.³⁰ Children have been more exposed to domestic violence and abuse in their homes and communities. The likelihood of this occurring in the ECA was increased by the already high prevalence of violent discipline in the region, where physical abuse and the corporal punishment of children are ubiquitous. Young women and girls were also at higher risk of experiencing gender-based violence (GBV), intimate partner violence or sexual exploitation during the pandemic.³¹

22 Parker & Alfaro, 2021; UNICEF ECA, 2020.

23 Parker & Alfaro, 2021.

24 UN Barbados & the Eastern Caribbean, 2021.

25 Caribbean small states (CSS), include Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Monserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

26 Sayedricardo & Habalian, 2019.

27 For instance, headteachers, deputy heads, school principals, school administrators and special educational needs coordinators.

28 UNICEF & CAPRI, 2021.

29 World Bank, 2022.

30 Ribes et al., 2020; UN Barbados & the Eastern Caribbean, 2021; UNICEF & CAPRI, 2021.

31 UNICEF & CAPRI, 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic also significantly affected children on the move. Due to border closures, Venezuelan migrants entering the ECA were now doing so illegally, so they had limited access to social services. By the end of 2021, just over 21,500 Venezuelan migrants and refugees were in Trinidad and Tobago, 18 percent of which were children.³² Moreover, Trinidad and Tobago's national education system could not accommodate these migrant children, leaving over 4,000 to rely on alternative education platforms for support.³³

Overall, disruption in education due to COVID-19 has had significant financial implications, costing the education sector approximately US\$92.5 million. Of this amount, around US\$85.7 million was in productivity losses. Due to the socio-economic challenges faced by many children and their families, governments introduced alternative programmes to ensure their well-being. Approximately US\$3.8 million was spent on implementing alternative school feeding programmes.³⁴

With the resumption of face-to-face classes across the ECA, several educational challenges have emerged and intensified. These challenges include socio-economic disparities, insufficient support for students, disciplinary issues, violence in and around schools and difficulties experienced by students transitioning between grades. Additionally, the readiness and training of teachers present significant concerns.

A notable issue has been the high dropout rates and grade repetition. Before the pandemic, 3.3 percent of students aged 12-14 were out of school, while 33 percent were over-age and at risk of not completing school. This was more prevalent among male students compared to girls, as boys are twice as likely to repeat and drop out as girls, at primary and secondary levels.³⁵ Due to the educational disruptions and socio-economic recession caused by the pandemic, these challenges are expected to increase.

All countries implemented safety standards for reopening schools. Measures included ensuring schools had adequate sanitary facilities; access to water, soap and disinfectants; and improved ventilation and reduced class sizes to meet new health standards, whether for full or partial reopening. Schools also implemented sanitation procedures and adapted their school and classroom layouts to support social distancing. Once vaccinations were available, teachers were considered a priority group for vaccinations, and to support students' mental and emotional well-being, some countries have initiated training programmes for teachers, equipping them with the skills necessary to offer socio-emotional support.³⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Before the pandemic, countries in the ECA had made considerable progress towards achieving universal primary and secondary education, with around 90 percent enrolment in secondary schools and over 80 percent at the early childhood level.

The pandemic has had an undeniable negative impact on the education system. However, it has also brought valuable opportunities and lessons that could catalyse the transformation of education systems. One significant lesson is the urgent need to address the digital divide, as many students lack access to essential technology and internet connectivity. This situation underscores the importance of investing in digital infrastructure and ensuring access for all students. Additionally, the pandemic highlighted the necessity for robust teacher training in digital literacy to effectively deliver remote and hybrid learning models. It also emphasised the importance

³² UNICEF ECA, 2021.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ UN Barbados & the Eastern Caribbean, 2021.

³⁵ UNICEF, 2016.

³⁶ UNICEF LACRO, 2023.

of mental health support, prompting schools to integrate resources for students' well-being. Moreover, the use of technology in education has provided a great opportunity to innovate, promote educational equity and build systems that are better prepared for future disruptions.³⁷

1.9 UNICEF's COVID-19 Response Plan

In the context of growing vulnerabilities, worsening economic conditions, and increasing pressure on essential systems, UNICEF responded swiftly to the pandemic's impact across the region. UNICEF ECA's COVID-19 response was guided by its COVID-19 Response Plan (2020-2021), which was launched in April 2020 with three main objectives:

1. Limiting human-to-human transmission and protecting individuals from exposure to COVID-19 through risk communication and community engagement (RCCE);
2. Prevent and address the secondary impact of the outbreak; minimise the human consequences of the outbreak;
3. Enhance risk reduction and in-country preparedness, including coordination.

The primary objective was to limit the spread of the virus. Initiatives included risk communication campaigns to tackle misinformation, promote handwashing, and provide prevention guidance through social media, radio, and public messaging. Safe school operation guidelines were also developed, while behavioural assessments helped inform strategies to protect communities effectively.

The second objective aimed to prevent and address the outbreak's secondary impacts. Comprehensive assessments were conducted to evaluate the situation, and cash-based interventions were provided to support vulnerable households. Education efforts ensured the safe reopening of schools, the distribution of hygiene kits, and access to digital learning opportunities for underprivileged children. Additionally, psychological support was extended to families and frontline workers, helping them manage the crisis.

The third objective centred on enhancing risk reduction and addressing the broader socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. Advocacy efforts emphasised transparent information sharing and resource mobilisation to guarantee access to critical health and social services. Active participation in national and inter-agency coordination mechanisms strengthened collaboration across response pillars, ensuring a cohesive approach. Continuous monitoring of secondary impacts enabled timely responses to service disruptions, economic challenges, and emerging protection needs.³⁸

³⁷ World Bank, 2022.

³⁸ UNICEF ECA Evaluation ToR.

2

Object of the Evaluation



@UN_1280336

This evaluation focuses on **UNICEF's education response to the COVID-19 pandemic** in the **Eastern Caribbean Area (ECA)**, implemented between **2020 and 2022** as part of the **COVID-19 Response Plan**. As part of its COVID-19 Response Plan (2020-2021), UNICEF ECA supported government institutions through resource mobilisation, technical assistance, and service delivery via partnerships. Efforts focused on four key areas: device provision, connectivity, learning content development, and teacher capacity building. These were operationalised through five main activity areas:

1. Provide guidance to MoEs for the safe reopening of schools and distribution of critical hygiene and prevention items for use in schools (School Level Hygiene Kit).
2. Training of school principals and teachers on the use of hygiene kits and preventative practices.
3. Support the MoEs and Ministries of Health (MoHs) to provide support/referrals for psychosocial support to children, parents and the education workforce.
4. Support the MoEs in updating or developing education in emergency/contingency plans at the education sector and school level.
5. Support the delivery of education through online platforms and support with community-level connectivity for under-privileged children to access online educational support.

In 2022, UNICEF entered its sixth programme cycle, and all programmatic efforts were under the COVID-19 response. Building on efforts from 2020-2021, UNICEF continued to support safe school operations, digital learning, curriculum recovery, and psychosocial well-being.

2.1 Target countries

The Response Plan targeted 12 ECA countries/territories: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, and Turks and Caicos Islands.

2.2 Target groups

Within the 12 ECA countries/territories, UNICEF targeted up to 1 million people (including 370,000 primary and secondary school children and 230,000 parents/caregivers, community members, and educational professionals) with preparedness and/or response activities within its COVID-19 Response Plan (2020-2021).

Table 2 - Target groups and related targets

Target group	Planned target	Progress at 31 December 2021
Schools (Early Childhood Education (ECE), primary, secondary)	750	890
Children (in schools and in state care)	205,430	99,878 (Not disaggregated)
Principals, teachers	7,000	7,986
Children (primary, secondary)	94,000	157,700 (80,399 boys and 77,301 girls)
Vulnerable children (primary, secondary) ³⁹	25,000	49,432 (24,780 boys and 24,587 girls + 65 not disaggregated)
Migrant children	2,400	1,935 (950 boys and 985 girls)
Support the MoE to update or develop Education in Emergency/contingency plans	3	4

Source: UNICEF ECA Evaluation ToR and as per the Humanitarian Performance Monitoring (HPM).

³⁹ These are defined as children and youth directly affected by school closures, and indirectly by restrictions on movement, rising unemployment and poverty resulting from business shutdowns (MRP P.14-17).

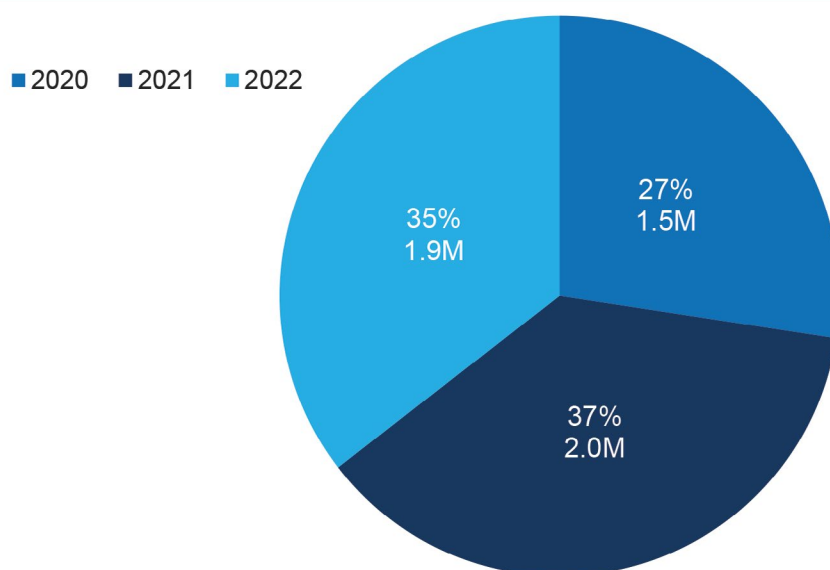
2.3 COVID-19 Response Plan and UNICEF Programme Budget Overview Education Sector (2020-2022)

UNICEF ECA launched its COVID-19 Response Plan in April 2020 with a funding appeal of US\$9.2 million,⁴⁰ and mobilised a total of US\$1.1 million by April 2020 (11 percent of the funding appeal) (see Annex Tables 4 and 5). This funding requirement was part of the 2020 UNICEF COVID-19 Humanitarian Action for Children Appeal (HAC), which was revised as needs evolved across various countries. For the Education Programme response, the estimated funding requirement in 2020 was US\$4.1 million to meet the needs of the ECA countries.

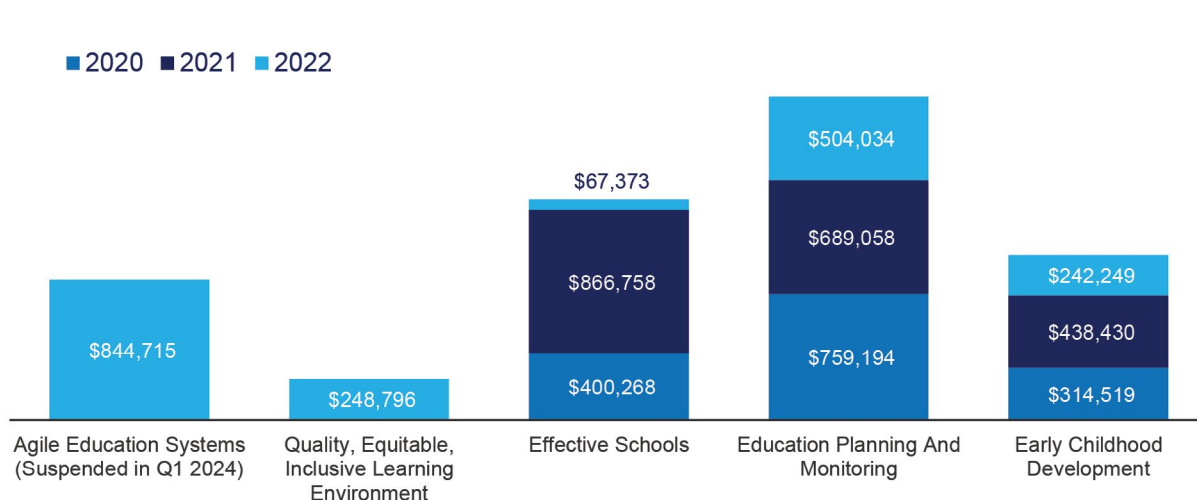
From 2020 to 2022, a total of US\$5.4 million was allocated to the education programme (see Figure 4). The distribution across various educational programmes shows that each programme received a distinct percentage of the total funds. Education Planning and Monitoring received the most significant portion, with 36 percent of the total, amounting to US\$1.9 million. This is followed by Effective Schools, which accounted for 25 percent of the total, with US\$1.3 million, despite a sharp drop in funding in 2022. Early Childhood Development was allocated 19 percent of the total, or US\$995,198, and experienced a decrease in funding in 2022. The Quality, Equitable, Inclusive Learning Environment programme and Agile Education Systems, both of which started in 2022, received 16 percent (US\$844,715) and 5 percent (US\$248,796) of the total funds, respectively (see Figure 5).

Between 2020 and 2022, the allocation of funds across various educational programmes reflected strategic priorities and responses to both ongoing programme and emergent needs.

Figure 4 - Total funding allocation per year



Source: InSight Cash Transfer Cube. UNICEF ECA

Figure 5 - Total cash transfers budget (USD), per output/intervention, 2020-2022

Source: InSight Cash Transfer Cube. UNICEF ECA

The detailed analysis of the budget allocation by output/intervention from 2020 to 2022 reveals that from the total funding of US\$5.4 million, significant investments were dedicated to Capacity Building, Development, and Advocacy; approximately 27 percent of the total budget. This priority reflects a strong focus on strengthening educational systems and promoting advocacy efforts across all countries during the pandemic period. Digital Learning Solutions/Online Delivery received 22 percent of the total funds, and Education Sector Plans/Programme Support also accounted for 22 percent.

The funding distribution between government entities and NGOs reveals a significant focus on governmental support. Out of the total US\$5.4 million, 74 percent of the funding was allocated towards governmental entities, amounting to US\$4 million, while 26 percent of the funding, totalling US\$1.4 million, was allocated to NGOs. The OECS Commission, headquartered in St. Lucia, emerged as the largest recipient of the allocation to implementing partners during 2020-2024, securing US\$941,215. This amount represents 18 percent of the total budget, underscoring the OECS's critical role in driving regional educational initiatives. As the OECS coordinates efforts among its member states, this substantial amount likely supports a range of collaborative projects aimed at enhancing educational outcomes across multiple countries.

The donor funding data shows a clear reliance on UNICEF's internal resources to fund the education response, with external donors contributing to specific strategic areas. The majority of the funding (70 percent) comes from UNICEF's Regular Resources Funds, which contributed US\$3.8 million across the three years. Other significant contributors include Global Partnership for Education (5 percent), the Development Bank of Latin America (5 percent), and USAID (4 percent). There was also a notable increase in contributions in 2022 from specific donors like USAID and the Development Bank of Latin America, reflecting a focus on digital education and responses to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19.

Taking into account the situation of unliquidated and unreported funds in 2020, UNICEF authorised implementing partners with unspent resources—e.g. in St. Vincent and the Grenadines under the Safe School Programming—to reallocate the outstanding balances toward covering costs related to the COVID-19 Response Programming. This flexibility allowed UNICEF and its partners to respond more effectively to emerging needs during the pandemic while maximising the use of existing funds.⁴¹

41 Information from St. Vincent and the Grenadines Funding Authorization and Certification of Expenditure (FACE) form



@UNICEF/2023/Nelson

A detailed breakdown of funding for UNICEF ECA Educational Programmes from 2020 to 2022 can be found in Annex 2 - UNICEF ECA Budget by Educational Programmes.

2.4 Theory of Change (ToC)

The Evaluation Team (ET) constructed a ToC in the education response to demonstrate the pathways towards change within the context of the COVID-19 Response Plan (2020-2021), using information from the document review and the inception phase interviews. This was presented and discussed during the Theory of Change Workshop held remotely on 12th June 2024 with UNICEF, the governments, and partners, and was revised after the data was collected. A mapping of evaluation questions against the ToC and evaluation criteria can be found in Annex 6.

Figure 6 - Theory of Change (ToC)

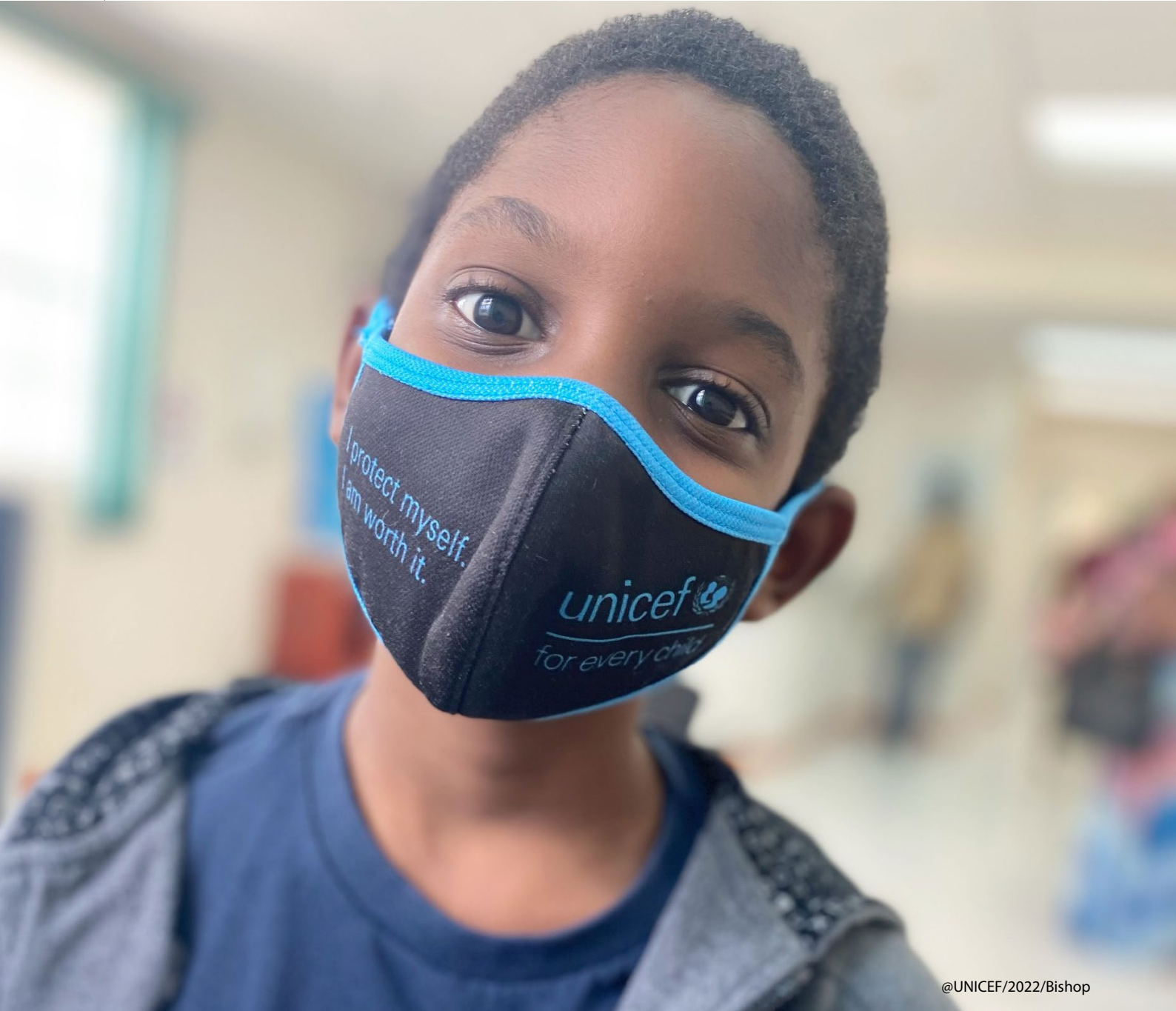


Assumptions

- At the country level, UNICEF ECA was able to enhance coordination across the UN systems, with clear roles, responsibilities, procedures, and resources to deliver as one in the 12 countries and territories.
- UNICEF ECA countries were well positioned to provide a coherent offer of learning packages, online digital platforms and resources, advice, and coordinated support to enhance country education responses
- Ministries of Education in each country, UNICEF ECA education staff and other stakeholders were able to undertake timely and reliable data collection, analysis and needs assessments of all vulnerable populations and to disaggregate data as needed.
- UNICEF ECA has provided coherent support which addresses gender equality, inclusion under and overarching human rights approach. This extends to strategies and interventions supporting the Transformation of Education results achieved during programme implementation, including effects in addressing disparities and inequities; and identify the most effective implementation strategies and partnerships for UNICEF to adopt for the implementation of the Transforming Education agenda.
- Development partners (including governments, community-based organisations, NGOs and private sectors) were responsive to advocacy and other support to deliver targeted services to beneficiaries (including the most vulnerable and those at risk of being left behind) despite COVID-19 conditions.
- Adequate resources for Transformation of Education are available.
- UNICEF ECA Member State support for the transformation approach to its implementation is consistent and clear throughout the process.
- UNICEF ECA works in a cohesive manner towards transforming education at country level.
- UN system reforms are conducive to the transformation, as new reforms and actions will require to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and create long-term sustainable transformations, including: introducing systemic changes to prevent the exclusion of vulnerable groups from education, reforming curricula and pedagogies for the inclusiveness and greening of education, improve effectiveness of instruction methods, and transforming the teaching profession by addressing teaching shortages and providing opportunities for professional development.

3

Purpose of the Evaluation



@UNICEF/2022/Bishop

This is a formative evaluation with a **learning focus**. The evidence generated will help position UNICEF to deliver equitable, inclusive, sustainable, and effective access to learning opportunities for all children, including those living in humanitarian and emergency contexts, directly contributing to the achievement of SDG 4.

More specifically, the evaluation aimed to:

- Demonstrate best practices for the continuity of education during a disaster/emergency.
- Generate evidence to inform the Transforming Education agenda within the ECA region as a key priority under the MCP 2022-2026. This included highlighting what worked, what did not, and lessons learned.
- Inform the development of the 2027-2031 Multi-Country Programme with the evidence generated.



@UNICEF/2018/Nelson

4

Objectives of the Evaluation



@UNICEF/2018/Nelson

The primary objectives of the evaluation are:

- To assess the coherence, relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of UNICEF's response to COVID-19 within the education sector.
- To ascertain results achieved, including addressing disparities and inequities; and identify the most effective implementation strategies and partnerships for UNICEF to adopt for the implementation of the Transforming Education agenda.



@UNICEF/2022/Ward

5

Evaluation Use and Users

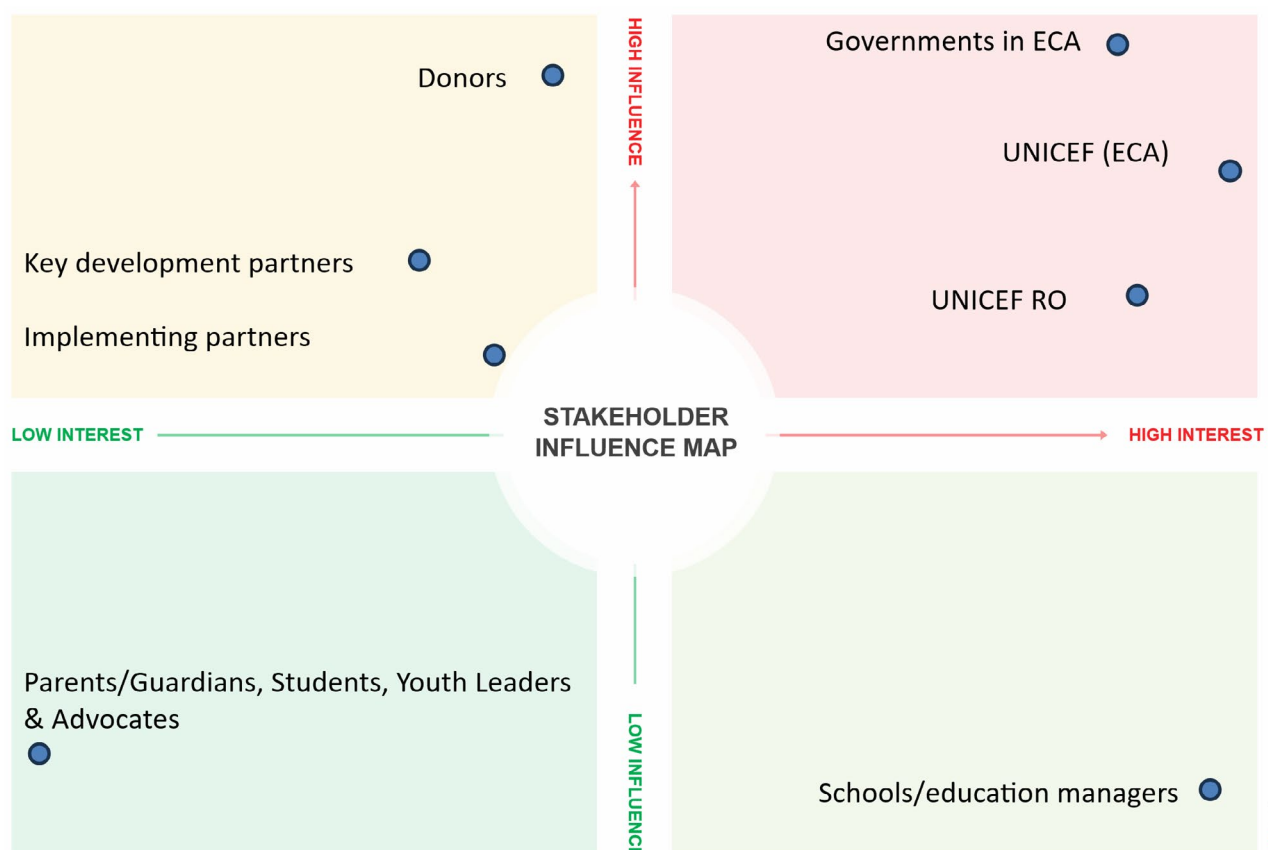


@UNICEF/2023/Nelson

The intended audience for this evaluation includes stakeholders with varying degrees of involvement in and influence over the programme, as well as those who are influenced by it. Based on the stakeholder mapping, there are multiple users of this evaluation: primary, secondary, internal, external, regional, and national actors. Below is a summary of the main users, and in Annex 3, there is a detailed analysis.

- The primary users of this evaluation are the **UNICEF Office for the ECA** and the **governments of the ECA region**, particularly MoEs and other related ministry departments involved in the COVID-19 response. For UNICEF, the evaluation provides critical evidence about the COVID-19 education response, including its successes, challenges, and lessons learned. It can guide their strategies to transform education, especially in times of disruption, and support decision-making for continued investment in education programmes. Governments, on the other hand, can gain valuable insights into which interventions were most effective during the pandemic, enabling them to mitigate future disruptions and enhance their education systems.
- Secondary users include the **UNICEF LACRO**, national and regional development partners such as the CARICOM and the OECS, donors, and stakeholders, including parents, caregivers, students, and youth advocates. The Regional Office can use the findings to inform broader strategies and investments, while development partners and donors can leverage the evidence to guide future funding and strategic decisions. Parents and students can better understand the impact of initiatives and use the evidence for advocacy in improving education systems. A stakeholder influence and interest map is given in Figure 7.

Figure 7 - Stakeholder influence and interest map



6

Scope of the Evaluation



@UNICEF/2018/Nelson

The scope of the evaluation was as follows:

- **Time scope:** The evaluation covered the implementation and results of support for education within the context of UNICEF ECA's COVID-19 Response Plan from April 2020 to December 2021. While 2022 was not within the scope of the evaluation, as the COVID-19 Response Plan addressed 2020 and 2021, the results, as per the Results Assessment Module (RAM), were reported against them, along with the recovery phase.
- **OECD-DAC Criteria:** The evaluation included an assessment of UNICEF's response to COVID-19 in the education sector for its relevance, effectiveness, coherence, and sustainability.
- **Target groups:** The evaluation included children (including migrants and those with disabilities) and those living in humanitarian and emergency contexts, as well as school principals and teachers.
 - Schools (Early Childhood Development (ECD), primary, secondary)
 - Children (in schools and in state care)
 - Principals, teachers (primary and secondary schools)
 - Children (primary, secondary)
 - Vulnerable children (primary, secondary)
 - Migrant children (e.g. Venezuelan migrant children)
- **Geographic Scope:** The evaluation included all 12 ECA countries/territories, with seven focus countries for more in-depth data collection and light-touch data collection (online survey) for the remaining five. Two case study countries were selected from the seven focus countries for a deep dive. The selection of these seven focus countries was completed in consultation with UNICEF and was based on the level of engagement and intensity of interventions implemented during the COVID-19 response.
- **The thematic scope** across the countries, along with geographic scope, is provided in Table 3 overleaf.



@UNICEF/2019/Trinidad&Tobago

Table 3 - ECA countries and territories within the scope of the evaluation

Categorisation	ECA country/territory	In-depth data collection		Light-touch data collection country	Main interventions undertaken during the COVID-19 response
		Evaluation focus country ⁴²	Case study country ⁴³		
UK Overseas Territories	Anguilla				WASH (hygiene, sanitation), safely opening of school activities Provision of devices Development of digital content Teacher training
	British Virgin Islands				WASH (hygiene, sanitation), safely opening of school activities.
	Montserrat				WASH (hygiene, sanitation), safely opening of school activities Provision of devices Development of digital content Teacher training.
	Turks and Caicos Islands				Development of digital content Provision of devices Teacher training WASH (Hygiene, sanitation), safely opening of school activities.
Leeward Islands (Independent)	Antigua and Barbuda				Development of digital content Recovery cycles (summer school) Provision of devices Teacher training WASH (hygiene, sanitation), safely opening of school activities.
	St. Kitts and Nevis				Development of digital content Teacher training Provision of devices WASH (hygiene, sanitation), safely opening of school activities.
Large Islands	Barbados				Development of digital content Provision of devices Teacher training WASH (hygiene, sanitation), safely opening of school activities.
	Trinidad and Tobago				Development of digital content Provision of devices Teacher training Provision of Health kits Creation of safe rooms in schools.
Windward Islands	Dominica				Provision of devices Teacher training WASH (hygiene, sanitation), safely opening of school activities.
	Grenada				Development of digital content Provision of devices Teacher training Service of procurement of devices WASH (hygiene, sanitation), safely opening of school activities.
	St. Lucia				Provision of devices Teacher training.
	St. Vincent and the Grenadines				Support the exam. Provision of devices Teacher training WASH (hygiene, sanitation), safely opening of school activities.

Source: Documents and KIIs.

OECD-DAC Criteria: The evaluation included an assessment of UNICEF's response to COVID-19 in the education sector for its relevance, effectiveness, coherence, and sustainability.

Out of Scope: The evaluation did not assess the results of UNICEF's support relating to the reopening of schools or the delivery of infection prevention and control (IPC) supplies. In addition, it did not evaluate the 'impact' of UNICEF's response, nor was it expected to make causal attribution claims, as UNICEF's support was only one of the contributors to achieving intended education outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁴² In these countries, data collection was limited to remote Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and an online survey.

⁴³ In these countries, in-country data collection was conducted, including KIIs, an online survey, focus group discussions, and observations.

7

Evaluation Criteria, Evaluation Questions and Framework



@UNICEF/2019/Harris

7.1 Evaluation criteria

The evaluation assessed the response against the OECD-DAC criteria to determine the extent to which its delivery strategies were relevant, effective, coherent, and sustainable. For this evaluation, we defined each criterion as follows:

- **Relevance:** The extent to which the strategies and activities of the response were aligned with the needs of countries, their priorities (national and sub-national level), and plans. It also included assessing the extent to which the response had been adapted according to changing circumstances during implementation.
- **Effectiveness:** The extent to which planned results were achieved and the outputs led to planned outcomes, as well as factors contributing to under/overachievement of results.
- **Sustainability:** Whether or not the benefits would continue and the extent of ownership and capacity of partners to take over the support provided.
- **Coherence:** The compatibility of the activities with other interventions being undertaken by UNICEF and other organisations (internal and external coherence). This included complementarity, harmonisation, and coordination with others.

7.2 Evaluation questions and framework

Table 4 below lists the key evaluation questions guided by the OECD-DAC Criteria. The evaluation framework organised the approach to the evaluation (see Annex 5 Evaluation Framework) and shows the alignment between the criteria, evaluation questions, judgement criteria, indicators, and data collection methods. The reformulated questions, based on those provided in the ToR and revised after data collection, along with the types of changes made, can be found in Annex 5.



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Table 4 - Reformulated evaluation questions and sub-questions

OECD-DAC Criteria	Key evaluation questions and sub-questions
Relevance	EQ1: To what extent was UNICEF's education response relevant? 1.1. To what extent did UNICEF support the education response of COVID-19 to meet governments' education sector needs and priorities, particularly for the most vulnerable populations and at-risk groups (considered inequity gaps at design and implementation stages)? 1.2. How well did UNICEF support the national education programmes and systems to adjust the COVID-19 response (to better align with the evolving needs of teachers, children/adolescents and their families, especially the most vulnerable)? How well did the supported countries revise/adapt their COVID-19 Response Plans based on evolving needs? 1.3. How well did UNICEF utilise preparedness and contingency planning during the COVID-19 education response? 1.4. To what extent were UNICEF-supported strategies adequate and used to enhance government initiatives for continuity of learning during school closures and to reinstate safe and equitable in-school learning opportunities? Strategies used to: • Enhance children's, adolescents', and youths' safety, well-being, and protection during the reopening of schools. • Reinstate in-school learning. • Introduce reformed teaching, learning and assessment practices. • Target and reach marginalised children, adolescents, and youths, and adapt programmes to their learning needs.
Coherence	EQ2: To what extent was UNICEF's COVID-19 response in education coherent (internally and externally)? 2.1. To what extent did UNICEF mobilise and work with other key actors to develop evidence-based solutions to address the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sector? Co-working/authoring, complementarity, alignment and non-duplication between UNICEF Education teams and relevant external technical teams (external coherence). 2.2. To what extent was there joint working across teams within UNICEF? Including alignment with the Education Programme strategy and objectives, and other social assistance programmes for families with children and other interventions being carried out by UNICEF (internal coherence). 2.3. What were the main factors that enhanced/challenged joint working (within and outside of UNICEF) and coordination of UNICEF ECA's response or lack of it? 2.4. To what extent were meaningful partnerships and/or coordination mechanisms established with other key actors (e.g., government/ civil society, NGOs, other UN agencies etc.), to assist, include and empower the most vulnerable children and their families, as well as teachers and other key education personnel?
Effectiveness	EQ3: To what extent was UNICEF's COVID-19 response in education effective in delivering on its targeted actions according to plan? 3.1. What have been the key results achieved for interventions at ECD, primary and secondary levels? 3.2. To what extent has UNICEF supported and prioritised equitable and inclusive access to education (learning for all), especially strategies to target disadvantaged students? 3.3. What were the successes and challenges related to education system strengthening, and building resilience of children, adolescents, education leaders and teachers, families, (including education sector preparedness, teacher capacity building, strategic partnerships, evidence generation and advocacy)?
Sustainability	EQ4: To what extent can UNICEF's support during COVID-19 be sustained? 4.1. To what extent and in which ways did UNICEF supported COVID-19 interventions account for sustainability considerations at design and implementation stages? 4.2. Which aspects of UNICEF support have been embedded in government programmes? 4.3. Is the support provided by UNICEF adequate to sustain digital learning? 4.4. How can digital learning continue to support and complement face-to-face learning and provide added value in the long term?

8

Methodology



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8.1 Methodological design

The evaluation methodology builds on established criteria and frameworks to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the interventions and their outcomes. A theory-based approach, combined with contribution analysis, was used to understand the context in which the response was implemented and to assess the extent to which UNICEF's support contributed to the observed results.

8.1.1 Data collection methods

Mixed methods were used to address the evaluation questions, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches alongside secondary data analysis. Primary data complemented secondary sources to bridge data gaps, enabling robust triangulation of findings. Data were collected remotely and through in-country visits to case studies. Methods included desk reviews of key documents, secondary data analysis (e.g. RAM and HPM), key informant interviews, online surveys, and focus group discussions with diverse stakeholders.

The evaluation applied purposive sampling, a common approach in qualitative research, to identify key informants across stakeholder groups and countries. UNICEF provided the key contacts of each country for the evaluation team to start sending the survey and contacted for the KII. Additionally, a snowball sampling method was used to reach other individuals who have been involved in activities related to UNICEF's COVID-19 response. Gender and equity considerations were integrated throughout the process, where possible, to ensure inclusivity.

Data were collected through four main methods:

1. **Desk review:** A desk review of 50 documents was conducted, which were made available by UNICEF and an external research literature search. This allowed for the best use of UNICEF's narrative and results reporting and an analysis of relevant documents, the most important of which were the Country Office Annual Reports (COARs), RAM, and HPM for 2020 and 2021, and the 2022 annual results report.

A detailed list of the reviewed documents can be found in Annex 13.

2. **Online Surveys:** Three surveys were conducted, gathering a total of 97 responses, including 79 from female respondents, 16 from male respondents, and 2 from individuals who did not indicate their gender.
 - A survey targeting government staff across 12 ECA countries, with 30 participants from 9 countries.
 - A survey for education professionals and parents, which had 14 respondents (11 teachers and three parents).
 - A student survey across seven⁴⁴ selected focus countries; however, there were only 53 respondents, and these were from the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The surveys were administered via Survey Monkey, and they combined closed and open-ended questions, ensuring broad coverage and confidentiality. The surveys were open for 3 months.

Detailed information on the data collection instruments can be found in Annex 9, and a detailed analysis of the surveys is provided in Annex 10.

⁴⁴ Turks and Caicos Islands, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, and St. Kitts and Nevis. The two case study countries are Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago.

Table 5 - Number of survey respondents by category and gender

MoE	#	Parents & Educators	#	Students	#	Total
Female	26	Female	13	Female	40	79
Male	2	Male	1	Male	13	16
Prefer not to respond	2					2
Total	30	Total	14	Total	53	97

Table 6 - Number of survey respondents by category and country

Country	MoE	Parents & Educators	Students
British Virgin Islands	8		
Trinidad and Tobago	6		
St. Kitts and Nevis	6		
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	2	8	
Turks and Caicos Islands	2	6	53
Anguilla	2		
Antigua and Barbuda	2		
Barbados	1		
St. Lucia	1		
Total	30	14	53

- 3. Key informant Interviews (KIs):** A total of 35 key informant interviews (KIs) were conducted, gathering in-depth insights from 37 participants, including three UNICEF staff members, 30 government officials, three implementing partners, and one representative from a UN agency. 23 were female, and 14 were male. No donor KIs were conducted.

Detailed information on the data collection instruments can be found in Annex 7.

Table 7 - Number of KIs conducted by group

Category	Number of KIs
Antigua & Barbuda	5
Barbados	6
Grenada	1
St. Kitts & Nevis	2
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	3
Trinidad and Tobago	7
Turks & Caicos Islands	5
Implemented partner	3
UN	1
UNICEF	2
Total	35

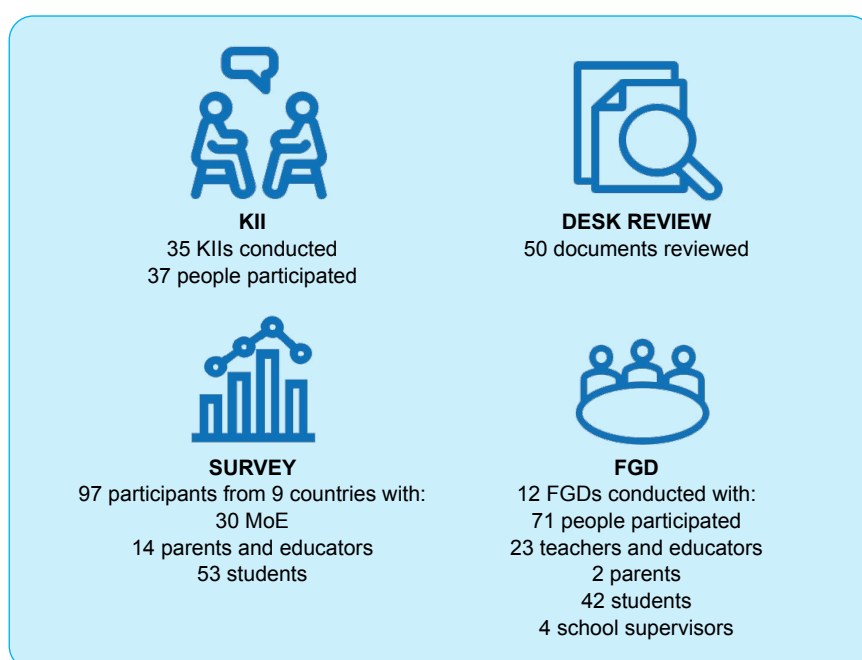
- 4. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** A total of 12 FGDs were conducted, capturing diverse perspectives from 71 participants. This included 42 students, two parents, 23 teachers and education managers, and four school supervisors.

Detailed information on the data collection instruments can be found in Annex 8.

Table 8 - Number of FGD participants by category

FGD	Country	# FGD	Teachers / educators	Students	Parents	MoE Staff
Primary School 1	Trinidad and Tobago	3	3	11	2	
Secondary School 1	Trinidad and Tobago	2	4	10		
Secondary School 2	Trinidad and Tobago	2	9	15		
Primary School 2	Trinidad and Tobago	2	3	6		
School Supervisors	Trinidad and Tobago	1				4
Secondary School 3	Barbados	1	2			
Secondary School 4	Barbados	1	2			
Total		12	23	42	2	4

Figure 8 - Summary of data collection



Case studies: The evaluation included case studies in Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago, aimed at building a robust evidence base, deriving lessons learned, and informing future programme activities. While not representative of the entire ECA region, they highlighted necessary adjustments to align strategies with changing national priorities and needs.

During data collection, convenience sampling and a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling strategy were employed to ensure a balanced representation of regional and national perspectives. The sample selection focused on respondents with relevant knowledge and experiences, including education personnel, parents, teachers, and students, with an emphasis on engaging marginalised groups.

The detailed analysis and methodology approach of the country case studies can be seen in Annex 12.

8.1.2 Data analysis

The data analysis followed a structured approach to ensure reliable and actionable insights. Thematic analysis was used to code data from various sources—including documents, interviews, and surveys—and identify key patterns and themes. Quantitative data—including budget figures and programme indicators—were analysed using descriptive statistical methods, with results visualised through tables and infographics to support interpretation and accessibility. The ET is aware that, while purposive sampling allows for depth and relevance in qualitative inquiry, it may also introduce selection bias. The ET recognises this limitation and has taken measures to mitigate it through triangulation and cross-checking multiple data sources for a comprehensive understanding. This rigorous process ensured the evaluation findings were consistent, robust, and aligned with the key questions.

For the qualitative data, the evaluation analysed two distinct monitoring data sets that were used within the evaluation framework, which covers the period of the COVID-19 response from 2020 to 2022. The first one is the HPM, a monitoring tool set to track data related to the COVID-19 Response Plan specifically. It was the main form of monitoring used during these two years, as the office was operating under the UNICEF’s COVID-19 Response in Education.

The second is the RAM, which is UNICEF’s programme performance monitoring data that provides insights into overall programme achievements. Regarding the RAM, in 2022, UNICEF entered its sixth programme cycle, which involved setting up a new results monitoring system that integrates Core Strategic Indicators (CSI). As a result, there were no indicators for 2022 reported. The data presented in the report are from the narrative documents used.

Table 9 - UNICEF indicators data set, 2020-2022

The HPM tracker was utilised for 2020 and 2021, The areas tracked included: ■ Risk Communication ■ Infection Control ■ Education ■ Child Protection ■ Social Protection ■ Migration Response	Between 2020 and 2021, UNICEF was operating under its fifth programme cycle, focusing on education through the following structure: Outcome 1: Lifelong Learning ■ Output 1: Early Childhood Development ■ Output 2: Education Planning and Monitoring ■ Output 3: Effective Schools	In 2022, with the transition to the sixth programme cycle, the structure shifted to: Outcome 1: Inclusive Education ■ Output 1: Inclusive Schools ■ Output 2: Supported Access to Education ■ Output 3: Agile Education Systems
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Source: UNICEF Results Assessment Module (RAM) 2020-2022

A detailed analysis of UNICEF’s educational indicators from 2020 to 2022 can be found in Annex 11 - Indicators Data Analysis, and an overview of indicators can be found in Annex 4.

8.1.3 Limitations and mitigation measures

Limitations and the mitigation measures are provided in Table 10 below.

Table 10 - Limitations and mitigation measures

Risk	Description	Mitigation
Low Response Rates	Participation from certain groups—particularly students and parents—was lower than anticipated, affecting the comprehensiveness of perspectives, especially from marginalised populations.	The ET collaborated with UNICEF and local partners to identify trusted intermediaries (e.g. teachers, community leaders) to encourage participation, and extended data collection timelines.
Self-Reported Data	The evaluation relied on self-reported data from surveys, interviews, and focus groups, which introduces a risk of response bias, as participants may have provided socially desirable answers or faced recall limitations.	The ET triangulated self-reported data with other sources (e.g. reports, observations, statistics), and used neutral phrasing and probing techniques in interviews/focus groups to reduce social desirability bias.
Recall Limitations	Due to the time elapsed since the interventions took place during the COVID-19 period, some respondents may have had difficulty recalling detailed information, potentially impacting the accuracy and depth of responses.	The ET focused on questions on broader experiences and significant events to reduce the need for precise recall. They validated accounts through triangulation and document review and asked about outcomes rather than specific dates.
Government Staff Turnover	The turnover of government officials limited access to firsthand insights, as some key personnel involved in the interventions were no longer in their positions. This affected the continuity of information and institutional memory.	The ET tried to identify and include new staff in data collection with the support of UNICEF and where possible, they also recontacted former staff.
Sampling Constraints	The use of convenience and purposive sampling, while effective in capturing relevant perspectives, may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across all ECA countries/territories. Some key stakeholders may have been unintentionally excluded.	The ET employed snowball sampling to broaden its reach and relied on UNICEF's support to access key individuals.
Timing of Data Collection	Data collection coincided with holiday festivities, which may have impacted stakeholder engagement. Schoolchildren and education personnel, in particular, may have been less available, influencing response rates and the depth of insights gathered.	The ET adjusted schedules to accommodate availability, including extending the data collection time. They coordinated early with stakeholders to avoid conflicts with key dates and deadlines, and used multiple modes of data collection (face-to-face, online, and surveys).
Limited Access to Documents	Not all requested documents were available to the ET, from both UNICEF and partners, constraining their ability to conduct a comprehensive review of programme implementation and outcomes.	The ET continued liaising with UNICEF and partners to request missing documents. Where not available, they used interviews to reconstruct implementation details and available data.
Limited Disaggregation of Data by Gender and Other Categories	Lack of disaggregated data, particularly by gender and other relevant categories such as age, disability status, or geographic location. Most of the indicator data available to the ET was aggregated, which restricted the ability to conduct a more nuanced analysis of differential impacts across groups.	The ET used all available data but acknowledges that this constraint may have limited the depth of insights, especially regarding equity and inclusion dimensions.
Incomplete Survey Coverage	The ET was unable to conduct surveys with all target groups and countries, which limited the representativeness of the findings and left potential gaps in capturing diverse perspectives across the ECA region.	The ET clearly reports which countries/groups are included and which are not. They have avoided overgeneralising findings and have highlighted areas for further study.

8.2 Evaluation norms and ethical considerations

The ET followed the UNEG ethical guidelines to fulfil its obligations to respondents participating in this evaluation.

These principles were as follows:

- **Respect for dignity and diversity:** The team respected cultural differences, local customs, religious beliefs, gender, disability, age, and ethnicity, considering their potential implications during the research. Efforts were made to minimise any risk of disruption to respondents, provide ample notice, and respect their privacy.
- **Rights:** Participants were treated as autonomous agents and were given sufficient time and information to decide whether to participate, without any pressure. They were selected based on the defined sampling methodology.
- **Redress:** Respondents received adequate information on how to seek redress and register complaints. The mechanisms for redress were defined in coordination with the Plan.
- **Confidentiality:** The team respected respondents' right to provide information in confidence and informed them about the scope and limits of confidentiality. Names and other sensitive information were anonymised.
- **Data security:** All data was stored systematically and securely, in line with data protection policies. The information was accessible only to the evaluation team. If requested, and after appropriate anonymisation, the data will be shared with UNICEF.
- **Responsibility:** Any disputes or differences of opinion within the ET or between the team and the commissioner of the evaluation regarding findings and recommendations were clearly explained.
- **Integrity and independence:** Any emerging issues or potential deviations were discussed and agreed upon with UNICEF. The evaluation team provided an independent judgement, free from bias, and takes full responsibility for the accuracy of the information presented in the report.
- **Intellectual property:** The team acknowledges that all materials produced during the evaluation are UNICEF's property and can only be used with prior written permission.
- **Incidents:** Any arising issues were reported through regular meetings with the UNICEF evaluation managers.

A formal ethical review was conducted, and all team members completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program courses on ethics through the University of the West Indies, receiving certification. Ethical approval was received from the Health Media Lab (HML) Independent Review Board.

9

Findings



@UNICEF/2023/Nelson

This section presents the evaluation findings ascertaining the extent to which UNICEF ECA's COVID-19 response within the context of the education sector has been relevant, effective, coherent and sustainable. The sources of evidence used to substantiate the findings are provided in the footnotes, and the strength of evidence is provided in the methodology.

9.1 RELEVANCE: To what extent was UNICEF's education response relevant? (*Did it do the right thing?*)

Summary of key findings: *UNICEF's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was highly relevant. The design was highly participatory to support joint COVID-19 preparation and response mechanisms and plans. This participatory approach was facilitated by both UNICEF and MoEs⁴⁵ engaging through working groups. The response addressed, to a large extent, the evolving needs and priorities of governments in relation to the different phases of the pandemic as well as the differing demands and needs of ECA countries/territories and affected populations. The response was developed in close coordination and collaboration with MoEs and health authorities and other implementing partners, and in alignment with the UN Sub-Regional Multisectoral Response Plan for the COVID-19 Pandemic.*

The COVID-19 pandemic response was generally perceived as aligned with the needs and priorities of the education sector, with most survey respondents (63 percent) agreeing to this.⁴⁶ Extensive ongoing consultations were held with MoEs to identify and analyse the country and school level priorities and needs in education. These were used to inform and refine the design and implementation of the COVID-19 response in education;⁴⁷ for example, UNICEF initiated a mapping of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services in the ECA to identify gaps and enhance interventions.

UNICEF also played a critical role in shaping policies and frameworks to guide schools through reopening and recovery. For example, The Spotlight Initiative is an example of how ECA countries revised or adapted their COVID-19 plans as the pandemic evolved. Interviewed personnel from the MoEs praised the constant helpful support offered by UNICEF's education team, and their readiness to pragmatically support and adapt as needed.

UNICEF adapted to the evolving circumstances, revising its strategies based on needs assessments, national consultation reports, workshops, MoE engagement, and school and community leadership support. Results from the survey showed that 63 percent of respondents felt that UNICEF supported changes and adaptations to education plans/programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic either well or very well.⁴⁸ UNICEF's consultations and meetings with MoE officials successfully responded to their urgent need for information when ministries were faced with wide-ranging decisions affecting learners and teachers. This was particularly important as the situation was unprecedented and they had little clarity over available options, especially in the first months of the pandemic. Practical questions about how to deal with online digital education or how to protect children and teachers from being infected by the virus were discussed to identify needs and inform the response.

The education system in the ECA needed to quickly adapt the curricula and lessons to ensure continuity of learning. With school closures, traditional learning approaches needed to be replaced with innovative and flexible approaches aimed at encouraging meaningful learning. In response to these needs UNICEF, in partnership with MoEs, quickly launched a range of highly relevant projects and initiatives. By leveraging

⁴⁵ According to UNICEF staff and external stakeholders.

⁴⁶ Evaluation survey 40% reporting to be mostly aligned and 23% highly aligned to the needs.

⁴⁷ UNICEF National Consultation Reports.

⁴⁸ Either well (37%) or very well (27%)

partnerships with national governments, regional organisations like the OECS, and international partners, UNICEF successfully supported the transition to a blended learning approach.

Interventions were adapted to the country contexts. UNICEF supported MoEs in developing curricula and online lessons, as well as adapting guidelines for remote learning, which enabled the development of teacher training materials and gave teachers direction on how they should proceed with the online modality. Schools made impressive efforts in switching from face-to-face to remote learning approaches using digital means, with remote learning strategies employed by countries varying widely depending on levels of access to devices and connectivity.

Most educational processes were digitised or adapted to the new distance learning modalities. UNICEF helped to make distance learning more accessible, which was particularly important for vulnerable children who would otherwise have been excluded from education. In this way, UNICEF and MoEs aimed to reach the most excluded populations and bring education into the home.

Relying on distance learning was a suitable response in line with the needs, and overall, for continuity of learning during school closures. ECA countries/territories were better prepared to adopt this approach compared to other countries in the region, due on experience from past emergencies, such as hurricanes and storms. Most households in ECA countries also have a mobile phone, as 90 percent of the population is covered by a third-generation wireless mobile network (3G).⁴⁹

One of the most significant ways that UNICEF supported ECA MoEs and schools to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic was to adapt and improve education plans and programmes. For example, to promote safe learning environments, UNICEF distributed PPE, handwashing stations, and sanitisers to schools to help reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading. It also helped to establish health units within MoEs to monitor and manage COVID-19 cases among students and staff.

Recognising the emotional toll of the pandemic and the need to intervene in this area, UNICEF rightly implemented psychosocial programmes, offering mental health support and peer counselling initiatives for students. Though limited, ECA governments offered similar help to teachers. These efforts aimed to create a supportive environment for learning while addressing stress and anxiety caused by school closures and uncertainty, however providing interventions to respond to parents' levels of stress was a missed opportunity and an area for future consideration.

As schools began to reopen, UNICEF was able to strongly draw on guidance and frameworks from the World Health Organization (WHO) as well as international best practices from the UNICEF Regional Offices and Headquarters. This enabled them to provide guidance very quickly on reopening schools safely in ECA countries and territories. In Trinidad and Tobago, for example, UNICEF supported the MoE with communications and messaging by communicating guidance on hygiene practices for schools, which were reopening. Public service announcements and awareness campaigns were rolled out to promote hygiene practices and safeguard children's well-being. UNICEF's support for safe school reopening included helping to develop guidance on how to reopen schools safely, which helped to set a standard for school principals and teachers to follow and communicate to parents and students.

9.2 COHERENCE: To what extent was UNICEF's COVID-19 response in education coherent (internally and externally)? (How well did it fit?)

Summary of key findings: *UNICEF demonstrated strong external coherence in its COVID-19 education response across the region, characterised by joint working for complementarity, alignment with partners, and avoiding duplication. By establishing partnerships with regional bodies, governments, NGOs, and donors, UNICEF facilitated evidence-based solutions that addressed immediate challenges in the education sector whilst also setting in motion models that would affect the ways that schools improved their use of technology to complement traditional modes of teaching in the long term. Strong external coherence was evident at design stage through co-designing strategies with, for example, the OECS, complementing partners' technical and financial resources. UNICEF's strong ability to bring in partners and experts to help with specific projects and initiatives was frequently acknowledged; for example, for updating teacher training curricula with distance learning content. However, while there was close working across some UNICEF sections to deliver joint interventions, many of the teams continued to work in silos due to the absence of a strong focus on institutional coordination across programme teams.*

Working with other key actors (external coherence)

UNICEF demonstrated strong leadership in inter-agency coordination, contributing to the success of joint initiatives. Under the 'Delivering as One' framework, UNICEF co-led the COVID-19 Multisectoral Response Plan (MRP) with UN agencies such as the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), securing funding for education, child protection, and social protection interventions.⁵⁰ UNICEF also co-chaired the Eastern Caribbean Development Partners Group, bringing together organisations like the World Bank, the European Union (EU), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to prioritise COVID-19 recovery efforts.⁵¹ Joint programmes with the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and UN Women advanced adaptive social protection in Barbados and St. Lucia, to ensure that support was accessible to vulnerable families.⁵² UNICEF also partnered with the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) to implement the Safe School Framework, training focal points in disaster risk reduction across ten countries⁵³ and integrating disaster management into regional education plans.⁵⁴

UNICEF's collaboration with external partners ensured that its COVID-19 response aligned with the local and regional development frameworks. It co-authored regional strategies with key actors to ensure a harmonised approach. For example, there was collaboration with the OECS Commission and Member States to develop the OECS Education Sector Response and Recovery Strategy to COVID-19, which emphasised policy harmonisation, digital transitions, safety nets, and community engagement. This strategy was informed by rapid needs assessments and stakeholder consultations with education ministers, technical officers, and development partners.⁵⁵ The OECS strategy was explicitly tied to the CARICOM Human Resource Development Strategy 2030, the SDGs, and the OECS Growth and Development Strategy, emphasising disaster resilience and digital equity.⁵⁶ Regionally, UNICEF co-chaired the Inclusive, Equitable and Prosperous

⁵⁰ UNICEF EYRS 2021

⁵¹ UNICEF EYRS 2021

⁵² UNICEF EYRS 2022

⁵³ UNICEF RAM 2020

⁵⁴ UNICEF RAM 2021

⁵⁵ OECS Education Sector Response Strategy

⁵⁶ OECS Education Sector Response Strategy

Caribbean Development Partners sub-group, coordinating with entities like the World Bank, USAID, and the Caribbean Development Bank to prioritise education recovery.⁵⁷

UNICEF also partnered with the OECS Commission and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to accelerate the giga Initiative, a tripartite effort to connect schools to affordable internet, which included developing a regional Information and communication technology (ICT) policy framework and securing funding.⁵⁸ Additionally, as part of being the co-lead of the MRP (aligning education, child protection, and social protection interventions with other agencies), UNICEF was able to secure 93.8 percent of funding needed.⁵⁹

UNICEF worked well in collaboration with UN and other partners, leveraging upon their expertise and avoiding duplication. This included partnering with UNDP and UN Women to produce socioeconomic impact⁶⁰ analyses in eight Eastern Caribbean countries, which informed policies on child poverty reduction and education continuity.⁶¹ This partnership also led to the development of a **microsimulation model** to assess COVID-19's socioeconomic impacts in St. Lucia, which in turn informed targeted education interventions, including school feeding and digital access programmes for poverty-affected households.⁶² UNICEF also collaborated with the World Bank and WHO on Safe School Reopening Guidelines which ensured students returned to classrooms with hygiene supplies and blended learning protocols.⁶³

In partnership with Digicel, UNICEF led the launch of an Education Communications Campaign (text messaging/traditional media) while other NGOs focused on device distribution.⁶⁴ It also worked with the OECS Commission to train educators in digital pedagogy through the Academic Recovery Programme (ARP)⁶⁵ and NotesMaster, to ensure that the digital content created was of high quality and suitable for different levels of education.⁶⁶

UNICEF worked closely with national governments to deliver critical early education services, including for ECD. For example in St. Kitts and Nevis, and Trinidad and Tobago, it engaged ECD stakeholders, including teen parents and migrant families, to improve child development knowledge and care practices through community-based programmes.⁶⁷ Similarly, in Grenada, the Mount Horne Child Development Centre was completed through a partnership with the Government of Grenada, UNDP, and the India-UN Development Partnership Fund, directly strengthening national systems for early childhood care and education.⁶⁸

MoEs were key partners in developing social-emotional learning materials and safety guidelines, as seen in collaborations with the MoE in St. Vincent and the Grenadines to create child-friendly spaces during volcanic eruptions,⁶⁹ and in Grenada to align digital content with curricula.⁷⁰ In Barbados, UNICEF worked with the MoE's school reopening roadmap by helping to integrate global best practices.⁷¹

UNICEF also leveraged partnerships with the private sector to increase reach. A formal partnership with telecommunications company FLOW enabled the dissemination of lifesaving messages, while the Caribbean

57 UNICEF EYRS 2020

58 UNICEF EYRS 2020; RAM 2020

59 UNICEF EYRS 2020

60 COVID-19 Macroeconomic and Human Impact Assessment Data.

61 UNICEF EYRS 2020

62 UNICEF EYRS 2020

63 UNICEF RAM 2020

64 OECS Education Sector Response Strategy

65 UNICEF RAM 2021

66 Beverley allen shalley Galloway

67 UNICEF EYRS 2020

68 UNICEFRAM 2021

69 KII St. Vincent & the Grenadines 3

70 KII Antigua and Barbuda 1; KII UNICEF ECA 2

71 KII Barbados 3

Broadcasting Corporation (in Barbados) broadcast UNICEF public service announcements, leveraging traditional and social media to engage diverse audiences.⁷² During school closure, the strategic partnership between UNICEF, NotesMaster and ITU ensured high-quality digital education content and ICT infrastructure for students and teachers.⁷³

NGOs also played a pivotal role in implementation of UNICEF's interventions. The Heroes Foundation trained 19 teachers in Grenada to deliver Comprehensive Sexuality Education, reaching 360 children through digital tools.⁷⁴ Partnerships with CARITAS Antilles and the Pan American Development Foundation improved migrant children's access to services.⁷⁵ However, concerns were raised that over-reliance on NGOs risked weakening government systems and capacity.⁷⁶

UNICEF's COVID-19 education response was enhanced by its trusted partnerships: their reputation as trustworthy played a key role in facilitating collaboration. Stakeholders in Barbados, for example, viewed UNICEF as a credible partner, ensuring willingness to support initiatives for children.⁷⁷ Stakeholders highlighted UNICEF's non-prescriptive style of communication to partners as enabling coherent, context-specific solutions: "They would say, here are some things we're doing... would you consider?"⁷⁸

However, partners found it difficult to navigate UNICEF's internal systems, particularly for multi-sectoral initiatives,⁷⁹ which caused implementation delays and dissatisfaction. In Grenada, for example, payments were delayed to teachers developing digital content and despite UNICEF's efforts to compensate by prepaying future milestones, trust eroded.⁸⁰

Joint working across teams within UNICEF (internal coherence)

UNICEF's internal cross-sectoral⁸¹ collaboration aligned with overall programme objectives, demonstrated by an effective integration of education with other UNICEF initiatives. This collaboration was evident in school reopening strategies whereby education, social and behaviour change (SBC),⁸² and child protection teams jointly distributed hygiene supplies, developed psychosocial support programmes, and aligned with global Safe School Reopening Guidelines. The ongoing 'regular cross-sectoral meetings' enabled resource-sharing and unified safety protocols.⁸³ The SBC team worked with the education team to ensure that there was correct messaging around behaviours, which if implemented could reduce the risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19. There was messaging around proper hand washing and wearing masks correctly, as well as mental health.

UNICEF adopted a 'one umbrella' approach for internal collaboration, with daily virtual meetings across education and logistics teams, enabling rapid solutions such as repurposing resources for remote learning. This model also benefitted the coordination for response to later disasters such as Hurricane Beryl, reflecting the importance of 'protocols for quicker response and recovery'.⁸⁴ However, some programmes, such as early education, operated less jointly with education, leading to fragmentation of efforts. This was due to the absence

⁷² UNICEF EYRS 2020

⁷³ KII UN 1

⁷⁴ UNICEF RAM 2022

⁷⁵ UNICEF EYRS 2021

⁷⁶ KII Implemented Partner 3

⁷⁷ KII Barbados 2

⁷⁸ KII Turks and Caicos Island 3

⁷⁹ KII Implemented Partner 3

⁸⁰ KII Implemented Partner 2

⁸¹ KII Bernez KHodra

⁸² UNICEF does not have a health programme, but during the COVID-19 response, the SBC team led on and supported sectors with infection prevention and control and RCCE interventions.

⁸³ KII Implemented Partner 1

⁸⁴ KII Implemented Partner 1

of a centralised coordination body within UNICEF. There was more reliance on ‘individual relationships’⁸⁵ than developing systemic structures within UNICEF for a stronger internal coherence, resulting in inconsistent collaboration across teams and programmes.

9.3 EFFECTIVENESS: To what extent was UNICEF’s COVID-19 response in education effective in delivering its targeted actions according to plan? *(Did it achieve its objectives?)*

Summary of key findings: Overall, UNICEF made strong progress in meeting its objectives under the Response Plan, though not all targets were fully achieved, as reflected in the HPM data. UNICEF provided strong and wide-ranging support to the education sector throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Most interventions were delivered in close collaboration with governments and partners to ensure learning continuity, both during school closures and in the safe reopening of schools. Efforts included capacity building and system-level support to strengthen infrastructure, and to enhance the knowledge and skills of personnel across early childhood, primary, and secondary levels. This was achieved through the expansion of online and, later, hybrid education modalities. Key achievements, despite operational and structural challenges, included the enhancement of digital education, investments in emergency preparedness, support for continuity of learning, prioritisation of psychosocial support, and targeted assistance to the most vulnerable. While UNICEF aimed to reach disadvantaged students, including girls, migrant children, and children with disabilities, gaps remained, and the lack of disaggregated data limited the ability to fully assess the extent to which results were achieved for these groups of children.

Education system strengthening

UNICEF’s support during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to strengthening national education systems across the ECA, through targeted initiatives, strategic partnerships and increased budget allocations. These efforts included the development and implementation of sector plans, the integration of disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies, and the expansion of digital learning solutions.

The OECS Commission, as a strategic partner, received the largest budget allocation (US\$941,215 between 2020 and 2024; 18 percent of the education budget) for implementing education initiatives. As a regional body, the OECS supports collaborative projects across multiple member states, increasing reach and strengthening education systems. In addition, 74 percent of the total funding (US\$4 million), was directed to governmental entities, reflecting UNICEF’s strategic commitment to strengthening national education systems through direct government support.

UNICEF made a significant contribution to ensuring education systems could adapt and education continue through the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergencies (such as hurricanes), by implementing DRR measures, digital learning initiatives, and training for teachers and curriculum developers.

Countries such as St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados received substantial support to improve their education systems and their ability to adapt and recover from disruptions, notably through digital education infrastructure and ECD policy frameworks. Nevertheless, there are systemic challenges, including underutilisation of e-learning platforms and inadequate long-term planning, as well as funding.⁸⁶ There is still

⁸⁵ KII Implemented Partner 3

⁸⁶ KII UNICEF 2

a need to strengthen digital readiness through better infrastructure, teacher training, and integration of digital tools into national education strategies.

Key results achieved for interventions at ECD, primary and secondary levels

UNICEF made progress in education under the framework of the Response Plan, although not all targets were fully met⁸⁷ (see Table 10 overleaf).

In 2020, the overall achievements were as follows:

- Infection control initiatives achieved 66 percent of its target, with 497 schools implementing safe operational guidelines.
- 49 percent of the target was achieved for providing hygiene and personal care items, with 99,878 children reached out of the targeted 205,430.
- Teacher training for distance support reached 3,392 educators, achieving 48 percent of the targeted 7,000.
- 39,446 children returned to school after reopening, representing 42 percent of the targeted 94,000.
- There was a notable success in supporting vulnerable children through distance learning, surpassing expectations with 198 percent of the target achieved (reaching 49,432 children), by developing materials and guidance to support parents with at-home support for online learning.

In 2021, the achievements were as follows:

- 7,986 teachers were trained on Education in Emergencies (EiE), on delivering online education and psychosocial support, reaching 123 percent of the target.
- 157,700 children accessed formal or non-formal education, surpassing the target of 94,000 by 168 percent.
- Infection control interventions exceeded expectations, with 890 schools implementing safe school protocols (119 percent of the target).
- Migration response efforts had only 29 percent of migrant children accessing formal or non-formal education.

See Annex 11 for a detailed analysis of the HPM indicators.



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Table 10 - HPM indicators achieved in 2020-2021 education targets

Sector	Year	High frequency indicators	Target group	Target	Total Progress cumulative	% Progress
Education	2020	# of children in schools and in state care reached with critical hygiene and personal care items	Children (in schools and in state care)	205,430	99,878	49%
		# of teachers trained to provide distance support to learners with UNICEF support in the reporting year	Principals, teachers	7,000	3,392	48%
		# of children attending or going to school after reopening of schools	Children (primary, secondary)	94,000	39,446	42%
		# of vulnerable children supported with inclusive distance/home-based/online learning	Vulnerable children (primary, secondary)	25,000	49,432 (24,780 male; 24,587 female)	198%
Infection Control	2020	# of schools provided with safe school operational guidelines during a COVID-19 outbreak	Schools (ECE, primary, secondary)	750	497	66%
Migration response	2020	# of migrant children reached with blended/ online educational interventions	Migrant children	1,000	1,235 (621 male; 614 female)	124%
Education	2021	# of teachers trained on EiE including psychosocial support, education preparedness and response	Teachers	6,500	7,986 (3,870 male; 4,116 female)	123%
		# children accessing formal or non-formal education, including early learning	Children (primary, secondary)	94,000	157,700 (80,399 male; 77,301 female)	168%
Infection Control	2021	# schools implementing safe school protocols (infection prevention and control)	Schools (ECE, primary, secondary)	750	890	119%
Migration response	2021	# children accessing formal or non-formal education, including early learning	Migrant children	2,400	700 (329 male; 371 female)	29%

Source: Evaluation ToR

In 2022⁸⁸ UNICEF continued building on the progress made in previous years, focusing on safe school return, digital learning, and early childhood development. Overall, the key achievements were:

- 145,000 children benefitted from digital learning resources
- 5,417 key ECD stakeholders received professional development sessions across nine countries to support home-based learning and innovative pedagogical methods for children.
- UNICEF supported the Transforming Education Summit, where seven countries committed to transforming their education systems, prioritising foundational learning, digital education, and inclusive school environments.

⁸⁸ For 2022, there were no education targets were established in the monitoring system. This year marked the start of UNICEF's 6th programme cycle, which involved the transition to a new results monitoring framework integrating Core Strategic Indicators (CSI). As a result, no education indicators were reported and progress was based on qualitative data reporting.

The following subsections provide more detailed information on UNICEF's achievements for interventions at ECD, primary and secondary levels.

Early Childhood Development (ECD)

The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruption to ECD programmes. There was insufficient training for educators and caregivers to navigate remote and hybrid learning modalities, and a lack of sustained government funding or prioritisation for this critical stage of education.

In response to this, UNICEF supported a range of ECD interventions from 2020-2022, including shifting to online and community-based interventions. Over the three years, UNICEF advanced ECD via capacity building, advocacy, ECD policy, regulations, standards, frameworks, and partnerships. Around 59,503 children aged 0-8 years benefitted from more responsive and informed caregiving services. Just over 13,000 children were reached in both 2020 and 2022, while a significantly higher number, 32,277, benefitted in 2021.

ECD interventions during COVID-19 received mixed ratings in the survey, with 47 percent of respondents from the government survey reporting these to be very effective.

Key achievements across the years for ECD include the following:

Capacity development programmes equipped caregivers and teachers with competencies in digital tools and innovative pedagogies, improving the quality-of-service delivery. Capacity building was a key response strategy from 2020 to 2022, with 14,251 ECD stakeholders supported to enhance their knowledge and skills and to better support children's diverse needs.⁸⁹ Over two-thirds of these (5,417) participated in capacity-building sessions in 2021 and 2022 from across 10 countries and territories. These capacity building initiatives were focused on home-based learning and innovative pedagogical methods. In addition:

Box 1 - Key results for ECD interventions

14,251 ECD stakeholders enhanced their knowledge and skills.

59,503 children 0-8 years old benefitted.

9,110 children returned safely to face-to-face ECD programmes.

- Guidance was provided in 2021 to 1,100 boys and girls aged 0-5 years, and their families (virtual and in-person) on quality holistic development of young children using the Care for Child Development (CCD) methodology.
- Approximately 3,309 ECD stakeholders, including teen parents in St. Kitts and Nevis and migrant families in Trinidad and Tobago, accessed critical information to improve childrearing practices and foster holistic child development in homes, ECD centres, and communities⁹⁰ in 2021.
- In 2021, 175 educators were trained to be better able to support speech and language development, as a collaboration between the Ministries of Health and Education.⁹¹
- The Toy Lending Library initiative supported 652 practitioners and 2,069 children, fostering structured play during emergencies.⁹²

⁸⁹ UNICEF, RAM 2022

⁹⁰ UNICEF, RAM 2020

⁹¹ UNICEF, RAM 2021

⁹² UNICEF, RAM 2022

Support for ECD centres and preschool classes was only provided in 2021, as part of the safe return to ECD programmes. This included equipping 340 ECD centres with hygiene and sanitation supplies, online devices, and developmentally appropriate learning materials for safe reopening and safe interactive play, which benefitted 5,104 children. In 2021, 9,110 children under the age of five across St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, and Grenada returned to face-to-face ECD programmes as a result of ECD centres being assessed for their readiness to reopen safely.

Advocacy and communication ensured that the public had access to information about the overall benefits of quality ECD for children. Information was shared via social media platforms, television, and radio. There were more than 4,000 views on the MoE's website in 2022. UNICEF also leveraged virtual platforms to deliver information on early stimulation, breastfeeding, and positive discipline.⁹³

The key achievements in ECD are summarised in Table 11 below.

Table 11 - Key achievements in Early Childhood Development (ECD) support (2020-2022)

Activity	2020	2021	2022	Total
Supported ECD stakeholders to enhance their knowledge and skills	3,309	5,525	5,417	14,251
Children 0-8 years benefitted from more responsive and informed caregiving	13,800	32,277	13,426	59,503
Supported ECD centres / preschool classes	340			340
Children benefitted from service delivery of hygiene and sanitation supplies, online devices and developmentally appropriate learning materials for the safe reopening of ECD centres and safe interactive play.	5,104			5,104
Boys and girls aged 0-5 years, and their families, received virtual and in-person guidance for quality holistic development of young children using the CCD methodology	1,100			1,100
Migrant children 0-5 years had a positive nutritional status following nutritional assessments and nutrition counselling with families	226			226
Children under five in seven countries returned safely to face-to-face ECD programmes thanks to assessed for readiness to reopen safely and leaning, hygiene, sanitation, and other PPE supplies provided		9,110		9,110
Educators had a greater understanding of supporting speech and language development		175		175
Visitors' views on the Ministry's website on advocacy campaign benefits of quality ECD for children			4,000	4,000

Source: UNICEF's Results Assessment Module (RAM) 2020-2022, Country Office Annual Report (COAR) 2020-2022 and Human Performance Monitoring 2020-2021.

UNICEF equipped ECD teachers with new skills to deliver digital content effectively.⁹⁴ For instance, in St. Lucia, a web-based platform was designed to support ECD at home by providing resources for both teachers and parents.⁹⁵ Since the launch in the first quarter of 2022, more than 5,000 children and families have accessed the platform and engaged with the activities.⁹⁶ Support also extended to migrant families in Trinidad and Tobago, where 1,071 children under five received stimulation and care packages, and parents received counselling on child development.⁹⁷

There was also extensive effort to strengthen policies and early learning systems by promoting ECD policies

⁹³ UNICEF, RAM 2021

⁹⁴ KII Implemented Partner 3

⁹⁵ KII Implemented Partner 3

⁹⁶ UNICEF, RAM 2022

⁹⁷ UNICEF, RAM 2020

for children with disabilities and marginalised groups. Structured frameworks were developed to ensure private centres met minimum education standards, particularly in hiring qualified teachers. Additionally, UNICEF provided technical assistance for the British Virgin Islands Early Child Care Education (ECCE) Policy and supported the integration of ECD frameworks in Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and Montserrat. UNICEF supported the development in 2021-2022 of draft ECD policies in the British Virgin Islands and Turks and Caicos Islands, and updated them in Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and Montserrat, promoting integrated approaches for children aged 0-8.

Some of the contributing factors supporting UNICEF's success in ECD interventions included their strong partnerships and strategic initiatives through collaboration with governments, OECS, regional NGOs, and international organisations, which ensured widespread reach. Capacity building and policy integration also played a key role with frameworks and regulations. However, there were also factors that challenged the implementation of ECD programmes. COVID-19 disruptions led to extended closures of centres, limiting direct service delivery. Uneven access to technology further hindered remote learning efforts, exposing a persistent digital divide. Physical distancing measures also restricted monitoring and assessment of programme quality, and bureaucratic delays in funding approvals slowed implementation, limiting the reach and effectiveness of interventions as schools struggled to adopt programmes in a timely manner. Additionally, gaps in technical expertise emerged, affecting the development and maintenance of e-learning resources.⁹⁸

Primary and Secondary Education

UNICEF's efforts to enhance support for primary and secondary education were driven by strategic partnerships, targeted interventions, and innovative digital solutions. Collaborations with the OECS, PAHO, MoEs, NGOs, and regional stakeholders enabled resource mobilisation and the scale-up of programmes, ensuring learning continuity despite widespread school closures. Investment in digital repositories, device distribution, and teacher training supported the transition to blended and remote learning models. These measures helped to maintain education delivery during disruptions and ensured that children remained engaged in their studies.

UNICEF-supported interventions ensured learning continuity through hygiene packs, PPE, and digital tools for remote education, ensuring 298,678 children could continue to access learning. Of these, 99,878 were further supported to return to their classrooms, through the Safe School Reopening initiatives.

UNICEF provided hygiene supplies, PPE, and safety information to help students return to classrooms safely. It continued its support for the Safe School Reopening initiative, ensuring the provision of hygiene supplies and sanitation equipment to create safer learning environment.

UNICEF also facilitated the sensitisation of MoEs on joint World Bank-WHO-UNICEF global guidance for Safe School Reopening, guiding the development of School Safety Protocols in 2021. Furthermore, UNICEF provided 27,800 devices to support disadvantaged students to continue their learning, and 114 science kits to support learning during school closures. Additionally, 125,000 learners accessed UNICEF's digital repositories with open educational resources.⁹⁹

Some of the challenges encountered during this time included connectivity issues, and economic barriers that meant some students were still unable to participate in online learning. Solutions to this included providing them with hard-copy learning packages and flash drives.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ KII Implemented Partner 3

⁹⁹ UNICEF, RAM 2020

¹⁰⁰ KII Trinidad and Tobago 7

There was substantial capacity building of teachers, leading to 5,117 teachers being trained in online methodologies. An online 'Return to Happiness' training manual for teachers was also developed and used to train over 800 teachers through a series of online sessions.¹⁰¹ In addition, approximately 20,813 teachers, curriculum developers, ECD practitioners, parents, and other caregivers, received training to strengthen their knowledge and skills to facilitate teaching and learning in homes, classrooms, and other community spaces. The majority of these (12,389) were trained in 2022, benefitting approximately 73,802 children. In addition, trainings were also conducted with 315 parents and teachers on Positive Behaviour Management for Academic Success.

Supporting digital learning was one of the main areas of assistance provided by UNICEF during the post-pandemic period. They collaborated with the MoE in Turks and Caicos Islands, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, and Barbados to enrich digital learning resources for kindergarten, primary, and secondary education.

Box 2 - Key results for primary and secondary school interventions

298,600 children supported to continue education

20,800 teachers, caregivers, and education professionals with strengthened knowledge and skills

73,800 children benefitted from the strengthened capacities of teachers and caregivers

99,800 students enabled to return to classrooms

27,800 devices distributed to disadvantaged students

900 curriculum-aligned digital learning contents for grades K-6

26,600 digital learning materials developed

As a result, the capacity of 768 teachers and education officials in the six countries was enhanced in the effective use of digital skills to produce high-quality digital learning resources, leading to the development of 25,768 digital learning resources. It is reported that 145,000 children and 11,400 teachers across the six countries are likely to have benefitted from the usage of these resources.

In 2022, in partnership with the OECS, curriculum-aligned digital learning content for grades K-6 was developed,¹⁰² and 400 teachers were trained in the use of digital content development tools to create these learning resources. This provided digital learning opportunities to primary education students in five participating countries: Dominica, Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Lucia, and St. Kitts and Nevis.

Measures to improve school digital infrastructure included supporting 14 schools in Trinidad and Tobago to enable real-time classroom learning and virtual student engagement, and UNICEF also supported the MoE there to develop five digital textbooks and a self-training ICT toolkit for teachers. This toolkit trained 100 education officers and was distributed as hard copies and in digital formats to enhance digital instruction and web-based pedagogy.

A summary of key achievements in primary and secondary education is given in Table 12 below.

¹⁰¹ UNICEF, RAM 2020.

¹⁰² UNICEF, RAM 2022.

Table 12 - Key achievements in primary and secondary education support (2020-2022)

UNICEF Support	2020	2021	2022	Total
Ensured students' continued access to learning	141,678	157,000		298,678
Enabled students' continued access to education through online learning	28,000	97,000		125,000
Strengthened capacities, knowledge and skills of parents, caregivers, teacher, education professionals and policymakers	4,192	12,389		20,813
Children benefitted from the strengthened capacities, knowledge and skills of parents, caregivers, teacher, education professionals and policymakers	13,800	60,002		73,802
Facilitated the return of students to classrooms	99,878			99,878
Devices provided/reconfigured to support learning for disadvantaged students		5,302		5,302
Digital learning resources developed			25,768	25,768
Support on curriculum-aligned digital learning content for grades K-6			900	900
Teachers trained in the use of digital content development tools			400	400

Source: UNICEF's Results Assessment Module (RAM) 2020-2022, Country Office Annual Report (COAR) 2020-2022 and Human Performance Monitoring 2020-2021.

Psychosocial initiatives were consistently a strong area of intervention. UNICEF adapted pre-existing psychosocial initiatives to provide tailored support for children, families, and frontline workers. In partnership with the OECS Commission, other UN agencies, and national governments, UNICEF supported the delivery of MHPSS, including a 24-hour multilingual tele-counselling service linked to national emergency authorities.¹⁰³ This ensured access to help during lockdown periods when child protection agencies were closed. Over 1,000 children and caregivers utilised tele-mental health services, receiving counselling to manage stress and anxiety exacerbated by the pandemic.¹⁰⁴

As well as counselling services, UNICEF also supported social-emotional learning programmes and provided psychological first aid training and services to address the mental health needs of students and educators during the crisis. These initiatives were highly valued by participants and government stakeholders, who highlighted their importance in fostering emotional resilience and well-being in the education sector,¹⁰⁵ and schools incorporated psychosocial elements into recovery plans, indicating that they were considered relevant not only during crises but also in regular education settings.¹⁰⁶

UNICEF prioritised support for mental health, continuing the 'Return to Happiness' initiative, which offered psychosocial support, and launching the MyChild Helpline application in partnership with the OECS.¹⁰⁷ The app provided children and caregivers with direct access to child-friendly resources, mental health support, national toll-free hotlines, and emergency child protection services. UNICEF scaled up the app to expand its reach to Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Grenada, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. By 2022, the MyChild Helpline had been expanded to seven countries, further strengthening access to vital mental health resources for children, caregivers, and educators.

These efforts aimed to create a supportive environment for learning while addressing stress and anxiety caused by school closures and uncertainty. For example, in Trinidad and Tobago, UNICEF helped MoEs with training in psychosocial support for educators through the guidance counselling unit and supported the

¹⁰³ UNICEF RAM 2020, 2021

¹⁰⁴ UNICEF RAM 2020, 2022

¹⁰⁵ KII Antigua and Barbuda 2, UNICEF, 2020, 2021, 2022

¹⁰⁶ KII St. Vincent & the Grenadines 1, KII Barbados 3

¹⁰⁷ UNICEF, 2020, 2021, 2022; RAM 2021

distribution of the COVID-19 manual and resources for safe reopening. In Antigua and Barbuda, UNICEF supported MoEs to conduct a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) training in collaboration with the Caribbean Institute of Social and Emotional Learning (CISEL). This training was specifically designed for educators and teachers, not only helping them to cope during COVID-19, but also providing general emotional support tools. The sessions were live and held online over a two- or three-day period. The training was an important step in helping educators manage both their own emotional well-being and that of their students.

Other aspects of the response considered as highly effective by 53% of survey respondents (government officials), included communication and the provision of supplies.¹⁰⁸ The development and implementation of education guidelines and protocols were viewed favourably, with 47 percent of respondents considering these as very effective. On the other hand, capacity development and facilitated partner coordination were rated effective by only 37 percent of respondents.¹⁰⁹ Distance learning modalities and technical assistance also saw moderate ratings, reflecting ongoing challenges in implementing blended learning and technology integration. For example, 50 percent of respondents reported they did not know about efforts related to advocacy for continued education, and 47 percent were unsure about support for connectivity in schools.¹¹⁰

Key challenges

The distribution of educational materials and resources faced significant delays due to supply chain disruptions, logistical bottlenecks, and rapidly evolving pandemic conditions.¹¹¹ These challenges affected the timely delivery of learning materials, digital devices, and hygiene supplies, further exacerbating learning gaps for students, particularly in remote and underserved areas. When the schools reopened, classroom overcrowding posed another critical logistical challenge. Large class sizes made it difficult to implement physical distancing protocols, forcing many schools to adopt shift systems, which in turn created tensions between safety, accessibility, and quality learning, as shortened school hours limited instructional time and deepened learning losses.¹¹²

Procurement delays, staff turnover, and inconsistent implementation across countries revealed the need for stronger systems and long-term planning. Resistance from administrators to implement changes in health and wellness programmes, and difficulties in maintaining programme continuity due to leadership changes, further exacerbated these issues.¹¹³



@UNICEF/2022/Ward

¹⁰⁸ 16 respondents

¹⁰⁹ 11 respondents

¹¹⁰ 14 respondents

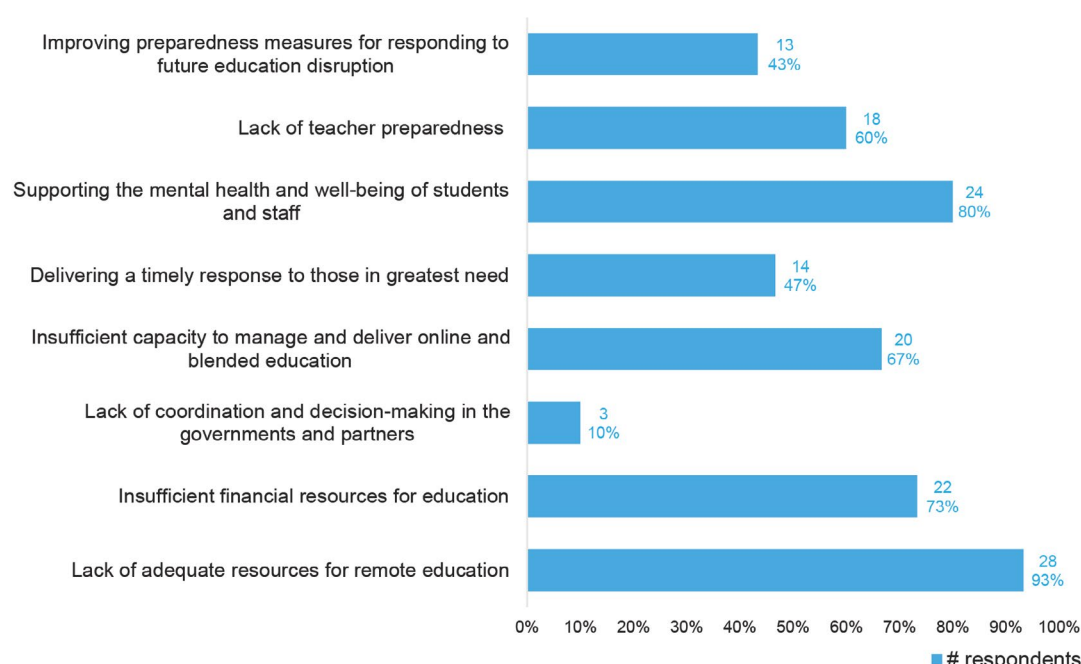
¹¹¹ KII Implemented Partner 1

¹¹² UNICEF, 2020

¹¹³ KII Trinidad and Tobago 3; KII Implemented Partner 2

Figure 9 highlights key challenges faced in the education sector during the pandemic.

Figure 9 - Key challenges in the education sector during and after the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: Survey UNICEF ECA COVID-19 Response Formative Evaluation - MoE

Students: There was a significant decline in students' handwriting skills and self-discipline following the transition back to in-person learning. Many students had become overly reliant on digital tools, autocorrect features, and typing shortcuts, making it difficult for them to write legibly and efficiently by hand. The shift to remote learning also affected their fine motor skills and ability to structure written responses effectively. The lack of consistent practice during online learning also meant that many students needed to relearn foundational skills, such as note-taking, spelling, and written composition.¹¹⁴

Teachers also reported a broader struggle with self-discipline, as students found it challenging to re-engage with structured classroom routines. Extended time on devices negatively impacted students' physical and mental well-being, while the absence of peer interaction hindered socialisation skills and led to behavioural issues. Many students experienced negative emotional and social consequences, reporting feelings of isolation, boredom, and difficulty staying focused due to distractions at home.¹¹⁵

Excessive screen time, particularly for younger children, raised concerns about developmental impacts, as prolonged digital engagement may have negatively affected cognitive, social, and motor skills.

Students, particularly those in rural and low-income areas, faced barriers to online learning due to unstable electricity and inadequate digital infrastructure.¹¹⁶ The shift to online learning revealed stark inequalities including in access to electricity and internet services. Some students, despite receiving tablets, could not participate in lessons because they had no electricity at home. Others disliked online learning, leading them to skip classes.^{117, 118} Students in low-income households often shared devices with family members, limiting their ability to participate fully in online education.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ FGD Trinidad and Tobago 4 Marabella South Secondary School

¹¹⁵ FGD Trinidad and Tobago 2 Clark Rochard Government School

¹¹⁶KII UNICEF1, KII Implemented Partner 3, KII Antigua and Barbuda 4, KII Implemented Partner 1, UNICEF, 202, Student Survey, Teacher Survey

¹¹⁷ KII Barbados 4

¹¹⁸ FGD Barbados 2 The St. Michael School (Secondary School)

¹¹⁹ KII St. Vincent & the Grenadines 1

Teachers: A majority of MoE survey respondents (60 percent)¹²⁰ reported that there was a lack of teacher preparedness¹²¹ for online learning. Many struggled to adapt to digital platforms due to insufficient training, and many experienced high levels of stress due to insufficient digital skills and increased workloads.¹²² Many educators lacked prior experience with virtual instruction, particularly older teachers, who found it more difficult to adapt. Some teachers had never used digital platforms prior to the pandemic and relied on colleagues for support, and teachers in general reported struggling to balance digital teaching responsibilities and personal workloads. Despite efforts like the MyChild Helpline, gaps in funding and capacity limited the reach of psychosocial support initiatives:¹²³ 80 percent of MoE survey respondents emphasised the need for more psychosocial support.¹²⁴

The lack of ongoing professional development further limited the effective integration of digital tools into classrooms¹²⁵ (remotely and for hybrid learning),¹²⁶ although some training programmes have addressed these gaps.¹²⁷ Additionally, teachers had to balance online and in-person teaching, often without adequate resources, creating stress and inconsistencies in instructional delivery.¹²⁸ Teachers' lack of digital literacy and experience with blended learning methodologies also prevented the effective integration of online resources into teaching practices.¹²⁹

Parents: Parental involvement in education increased significantly, as families had to take on a more active role in supporting their children's learning. However, many lacked the skills, time, and resources to effectively support learning at home, leading to significant learning losses, especially among students in the early years and primary education.¹³⁰

Despite being provided devices (such as Mifi Devices in Trinidad and Tobago) to enable access to internet, families had to take on the financial burden of paying for internet services, which many could not afford to do, resulting in further learning gaps. Many parents also did not have the knowledge or time to support their children due to their own work.¹³¹

Support for and prioritisation of equitable and inclusive access to education

UNICEF-supported interventions targeted disadvantaged children, particularly those from low-income households and rural areas. Concerns were raised, however, about the lack of intentional design at the planning stage, and targeted interventions to specifically address gender equality, needs of migrant children, and students with disabilities. For example, only 57 percent¹³² of survey respondents reported that disadvantaged students were frequently prioritised in UNICEF's initiatives (Figure 10).¹³³

¹²⁰ MoE Survey

¹²¹ KII UNICEF 1, FGD Trinidad and Tobago 4 Marabella South Secondary School

¹²² Teacher Survey

¹²³ UNICEF, RAM 2022

¹²⁴ Student Survey, Teacher Survey

¹²⁵ UNICEF, RAM 2021

¹²⁶ KII UNICEF 1, KII Implemented Partner 3, KII Antigua and Barbuda 4, KII Implemented Partner 1, UNICEF, 202, Student Survey, Teacher Survey.

¹²⁷ KII Implemented Partner 3

¹²⁸ KII Antigua and Barbuda 2

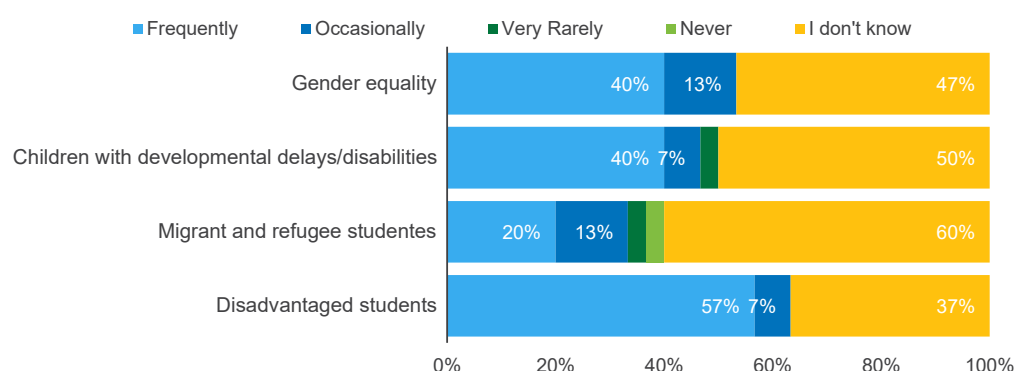
¹²⁹ KII UNICEF 2

¹³⁰ KII Barbados 4, KII Turks and Caicos Island 4, KII Turks and Caicos Island 4, KII St. Kitts and Nevis 1

¹³¹ FGD Trinidad and Tobago 2 Clark Rochard Government School, FGD Trinidad and Tobago 7 Plum Mitán Presbyterian Primary School

¹³² 17 survey respondents

¹³³ KII UNICEF 1

Figure 10 - Extent to which vulnerable groups were prioritised during the COVID-19 pandemic¹³⁴

Source: Evaluation Survey (government)

One of barriers to adequately targeting disadvantaged children was the lack of comprehensive and updated data available to help identify them. Although countries have Student Support Services or Education Management Information Systems (EMIS), identifying vulnerable students such as those living below the poverty line, wards of the state, and children with special needs was difficult. The digital divide also persisted during the pandemic, with rural and low-income students struggling with device maintenance and reliable internet access. However, despite these challenges, UNICEF was able to implement interventions to target the most disadvantaged children. This included the distribution of learning packages to children in vulnerable households to ensure educational continuity for those without access to digital tools or stable internet connectivity. For children affected by La Soufrière Volcano in 2021, UNICEF provided meals to 13,904 students preparing for exit-level exams.

Children with disabilities were particularly affected by the shift to remote learning. Many students with special educational needs (SEN) faced significant barriers due to the lack of adaptive digital tools and inclusive resources. To address this, significant efforts were made to meet the needs of children with disabilities, which included having teams skilled in SEN working on the online digital platform (Libs Master).¹³⁵

Teachers, responsible for developing online material, were made aware that the content they were developing needed to be for a range of people on a 'spectrum of capabilities and abilities'. Key adaptations made to the digital platform to address SEN included the use of audio and videos with captions and subtitles for children with hearing impairments, and different font sizes for children with slight visual impairment. Children with more serious visual impairments had screen readers where the content and the text could be read out to them, and other simple techniques included the use of bright colours for ADHD learners. It was reported that 'the development of special educational needs learners was at the forefront'.¹³⁶ Despite these interventions, however, the shift to online learning did not fully meet the needs of all SEN children, leading to significant learning losses,¹³⁷ and only 40 percent of survey respondents¹³⁸ reported that children with developmental delays or disabilities were frequently prioritised.

Migrant and refugee children continued to face barriers to education during the pandemic. Support for migrant children was integrated into specific programme areas, however despite these efforts, this group faced greater challenges and barriers compared to others. Only 20 percent of respondents reported that migrant and refugee children were consistently prioritised. UNICEF, in partnership with UNHCR and the Living Water Community

¹³⁴ Total of respondents 30

¹³⁵ KII

¹³⁶ KII

¹³⁷ KII St. Vincent & the Grenadines 1

¹³⁸ 12 respondents

(LWC) launched 'Equal Place' in Trinidad and Tobago in 2021, a programme providing education for migrant and refugee children facing legal and administrative barriers. This was designed as a blended learning solution to meet Caribbean Examination requirements for primary and secondary students. The programme expanded by 37 percent during the pandemic, reaching 1,198 children and supporting 1,071 younger children via early learning activities, care packages, and counselling.¹³⁹ The initiative introduced bilingual education for groups like Warao indigenous children and supported 150 adolescents through the Dawere platform, with 34 graduates completing secondary school.¹⁴⁰ The programme continued during the summer break, which enabled students to remain engaged in learning activities and, potentially, increase coverage by enrolling previously non-participating children even while schools were closed.¹⁴¹

UNICEF also introduced the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology, to improve English proficiency for migrant children. This initiative trained 131 teachers in 2021, with 25 piloting the approach.

Despite these many efforts, migrant and refugee children still faced legal and administrative barriers to enrolling in national education systems, particularly related to permits and permit exemptions which left them vulnerable to exclusion. Consequently, over 3,500 school-age children remained excluded from the national education system. This was exacerbated by challenges such as limited internet connectivity, despite efforts to distribute devices and ensure access to paid Zoom.¹⁴²

The pandemic intensified gaps in nutrition and early childhood education for migrant families, with 27 percent of Venezuelan households skipping meals in 2021, compared to 11 percent of English-speaking households. In response, UNICEF expanded its Care for Child Development (CCD) model to include nutritional counselling and partnered with LWC to provide cash assistance via QR codes.

Box 3 - Key results from interventions targeting the most disadvantaged children

27,800 vulnerable children received devices

2,200 migrant children and youth are supported with blended learning solutions.

775,000 people reached through social media campaigns on advocacy for safer, more inclusive schools while addressing genderbased violence)

4,742 teachers trained (44 percent male, 56 percent female) in using GBV materials.

A summary of achievements in relation to interventions targeting vulnerable children is given in Box 3.

Initiatives on gender equality focused on advocacy and awareness campaigns, and only 40 percent of survey respondents reported that there were specific interventions targeting gender equality. Some examples include in Antigua and Barbuda, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, where advocacy efforts contributed to increased secondary school enrolment rates for girls.¹⁴³ In Grenada, sensitisation campaigns and advocacy materials promoted shifts in attitudes towards gender norms and fostered inclusive educational environments.¹⁴⁴ Gender mainstreaming initiatives were also reported to be positively affecting equal access to educational resources for both boys and girls, promoting fairness in learning opportunities. Efforts included gender socialisation workshops aimed at encouraging inclusive classroom practices, though some activities faced delays in St. Vincent and the Grenadines due to pandemic-related disruptions.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁹ UNICEF 2020

¹⁴⁰ UNICEF 2021

¹⁴¹ The Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Children in Trinidad and Tobago, 2020

¹⁴² UNICEF, RAM 2020, 2021

¹⁴³ KII St. Vincent & the Grenadines 2, KII Implemented Partner 1

¹⁴⁴ UNICEF 2022

¹⁴⁵ KII St. Vincent & the Grenadines 2

In Grenada, sensitisation materials for students, advocacy towards attitudinal change regarding gender norms, and capacity building for teachers to better implement Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) were provided. Activities in Trinidad and Tobago included initiatives to augment girls' and boys' empowerment with the enhancement of HFLE teaching. Within this, 4,742 teachers were trained in the use of the GBV materials in the FASO toolkit¹⁴⁶ on the NotesMaster platform.¹⁴⁷ Around 70,000 students used the FASO Toolkit at least once.¹⁴⁸

Programmes such as the Caribbean Safe School Initiative (CSSI) and the GenU platform empowered young people to advocate for safer, more inclusive schools while addressing GBV. These efforts reached over 9,000 participants and resonated with more than 775,000 people through social media campaigns.¹⁴⁹ In Trinidad and Tobago, collaboration with the Heroes Foundation, under the Spotlight Initiative, empowered 552 children and youth from local and migrant communities to take action against GBV. Activities included initiatives in 30 secondary schools and community outreach programmes addressing issues like bullying, school violence, and child abuse. Similarly, in Grenada, a partnership with NotesMaster and the MoE trained 19 teachers in comprehensive sexuality education, benefitting 360 children.¹⁵⁰ However, the absence of consistent gender-disaggregated indicators limits the ability to track progress and tailor responses for boys and girls effectively.

Despite impressive efforts to target the most vulnerable children, gaps remained due to a lack of access to adequate internet and devices (refer to section on equitable and inclusive access to education in the effectiveness criteria), and the limitations of distance learning: effective reach; the education system's readiness to provide high quality learning opportunities; its suitability for learners, especially in terms of access; inclusion; and suitability for vulnerable and migrant learners with no bandwidth/connectivity.

9.4 SUSTAINABILITY: To what extent can UNICEF's support during COVID-19 be sustained? (*Will the benefits last?*)

Summary of key findings: *UNICEF's COVID-19 education response evolved from an emergency-driven approach to one increasingly focused on sustainability. While initial efforts prioritised urgent needs, longer-term considerations were progressively integrated, particularly through using digital learning and then later complementing this with face-to-face teaching, teacher training and various resilience measures. Initiatives such as Giga, NotesMaster, and support for hybrid learning aimed to embed systemic change, and some governments have incorporated these into national strategies. However, implementation has varied across countries, and many stakeholders remain uncertain about the extent to which many aspects will be institutionalised. Although digital learning centres, mental health programmes, and hygiene protocols have been integrated to some extent, challenges such as short-term funding cycles, fragmented ICT planning and structures, and limited government capacity will continue to undermine sustainability of efforts.*

¹⁴⁶ https://mptf.undp.org/sites/default/files/documents/2024-07/spotlight_initiative_trinidad_and_tobago_programme_final_report_redacted.pdf

¹⁴⁷ UNICEF 2021

¹⁴⁸ UNICEF (n.d). Results Assessment Module (RAM) 2021)

¹⁴⁹ UNICEF 2022

¹⁵⁰ UNICEF 2022

Sustainability was not the primary concern at the design stage, given the urgency of the situation and the need to respond promptly. As the pandemic progressed, however, sustainability elements—particularly digital learning, internet infrastructure, teacher training, and social protection—were more deliberately integrated into planning and implementation. Initiatives such as Giga and NotesMaster were designed with long-term goals, including universal school connectivity, the development of digital learning content, and the geospatial mapping of school networks. These and other aspects of UNICEF's support that have potential for sustainability and/or have been integrated into education systems are described in detail below.

Resources developed by NotesMaster¹⁵¹ aimed to reinforce the long-term integration of digital content into national education systems. The content was intended to be used to expand equitable access to quality, curriculum-aligned digital materials. In the first phase the focus was on content creation and the platform was implemented in Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Turks and Caicos and Grenada. In many of these countries the development of digital content was completed in 2022, paving the way for the second phase of the initiative, which focused on the launch of Open Educational Resources (OER) to sustain these efforts.

The NotesMaster learning content was integrated into education systems as it was aligned with local curricula, and materials were developed to be culturally relevant and appropriate. So far, 26,600 digital classes have been created, covering subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, English Language, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Agricultural Science, Modern Languages (Spanish and French), Visual Arts, Theatre Arts, Principles of Accounts, Principles of Business, Coding and Robotics, Building & Furniture Technology, Music, and HFLE.

In some countries, the platform has not yet been officially launched (at the time of this evaluation), but training and sensitisation sessions for teachers were ongoing to ensure effective use of the content, as seen in Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados. For longer term sustainability and enhanced ownership, some countries have expressed interest in hosting the NotesMaster digital learning content on their own education servers and online platforms, reducing the possibility of reliance on external providers.¹⁵² In several countries, new digital education materials were developed and made available through either MoE websites or newly launched national platforms, giving teachers and students easier access to online resources, thus moving towards a sustainable model.

One of the most significant initiatives supported by UNICEF, with high potential for sustainability, was the Giga project. Launched in 2019, through a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the OECS Commission, the ITU, and UNICEF, Giga's goal is to ensure universal school connectivity; that is, to connect every school in the ECA to the internet and provide students with access to digital learning opportunities. This initiative built upon the Project Connect mapping of over 500 schools' connectivity and helped coordinate regional efforts to improve digital infrastructure.¹⁵³ To support the MoU's operationalisation across the ECA, an OECS Giga Steering Committee was established, coordinating the implementation of the initiative in the region. To further support the implementation of the giga initiative, sensitisation sessions were conducted in all OECS Member States to make the internet accessible widely. The agreement also covers the development of educational content, the harmonisation of the OECS connectivity regulatory system, and the strengthening of local service provision to foster growth and positive market competition. The OECS has already trained technical officers

¹⁵¹ Interviews

¹⁵² KII Antigua and Barbuda 1, KII Antigua and Barbuda 2

¹⁵³ UNICEF, 2022

from Member States in geospatial data collection and has supported the compilation of the seventh edition of the Education Statistical Digest.¹⁵⁴

Psychological and health and safety measures implemented during the pandemic represent another area where UNICEF-supported actions have been sustainable, as they are now integrated into government systems. A module on responding to disease outbreaks was added to the 'Return to Happiness' initiative to adapt it to better support children suffering due to COVID-19 and will be included as a part of the joint PAHO / UNICEF program.¹⁵⁵ UNICEF's advocacy, technical assistance, and awareness campaigns on mental health have also helped to embed psychosocial support within comprehensive national education and child protection strategies. Sanitisation protocols, handwashing stations, thermometers, and mask-wearing when sick, along with compliance checks, remain standard in many institutions. New centres continue to adopt these as best practices for public health,¹⁵⁶ reflecting a broader shift in health consciousness within schools.

Digital learning to support long-term sustainability

UNICEF supported governments in developing national strategies to institutionalise hybrid and digital learning but issues like fragmented ICT procurement and a lack of centralised management hinder consistency.¹⁵⁷ Many schools operate independently, leading to gaps in software and hardware acquisition. Additionally, limited ICT personnel in education ministries makes it difficult to track and maintain digital infrastructure. Stakeholders emphasised the need for more funding to enhance digital tools and integrate technologies into education.¹⁵⁸ Despite ongoing efforts, challenges such as slow bandwidth, limited devices, and unreliable internet persist, especially in primary schools where digital learning remains underfunded.¹⁵⁹ Even where connectivity exists, disparities remain: many students lack Wi-Fi access, and even staff frequently struggle with internet speed.¹⁶⁰ Government initiatives like free internet access during the pandemic were discontinued due to misuse, underscoring the need for better regulation.¹⁶¹

There has been a significant shift in the incorporation of hybrid learning and digital tools, such as tablets, into education systems to enhance sustainability and future resilience¹⁶² to school disruptions. Additionally, some governments have committed to maintaining digital infrastructure, including Google Suite for education, to support online learning.¹⁶³ However, the extent of digital education adoption varies across countries. While some governments have actively expanded upon these foundations, others have deprioritised digital learning due to financial constraints.¹⁶⁴

UNICEF-supported teacher training on technology and digital learning is likely to contribute to the sustainability of digital learning. These efforts supported the long-term digitisation of education systems, aiming for sustained transformation beyond the COVID-19 crisis. ICT training and professional development offered in both online and face-to-face formats, equipped educators with essential digital skills, enabling them to integrate technology into their teaching during and—even more so—post-COVID-19. By gaining digital competencies, educators have been able to integrate technology more effectively into their teaching practices. Teachers have acknowledged that the training they received was highly valuable and instrumental in helping them

¹⁵⁴ UNICEF, RAM 2020-2022

¹⁵⁵ KII St. Vincent & the Grenadines 3

¹⁵⁶ KII St. Kitts and Nevis 1, KII Barbados 4

¹⁵⁷ KII Turks and Caicos Island 2

¹⁵⁸ KII Antigua and Barbuda 2

¹⁵⁹ KII Antigua and Barbuda 2

¹⁶⁰ FGD Trinidad and Tobago 10 Vessigny Secondary School

¹⁶¹ KII Barbados 4

¹⁶² KII St. Vincent & the Grenadines 3

¹⁶³ KII Implemented Partner 1

¹⁶⁴ KII UN 1

to quickly acquire the technological skills necessary to sustain education, ensuring continuity in learning, despite disruptions. This training allowed them to adapt more efficiently to digital learning methods, ensuring that students could keep up with their studies despite disruptions. UNICEF also organised train-the-trainer workshops to strengthen digital pedagogy and equip educators with the skills needed to deliver instruction effectively through digital means.

Tools such as Google Classroom, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams became essential for delivering lessons, facilitating discussions, and managing assignments, which has enabled a shift toward blended learning approaches, and significantly accelerated digital literacy among both educators and students.¹⁶⁵ As a result of online teaching, schools, teachers, and students are now more open to incorporating digital education initiatives into their pedagogical practices. This shift is expected to create long-term benefits as digital tools continue to be developed and integrated into learning beyond the pandemic.¹⁶⁶

A large majority (77 percent¹⁶⁷) of respondents recognise the potential of digital learning to offer flexible learning opportunities, while nearly half (49 percent¹⁶⁸) viewed it as a critical tool for ensuring educational continuity during emergencies (see Figure 12). Despite this recognition, substantial challenges remain in effectively integrating digital tools into traditional classroom environments. These include issues related to infrastructure, teacher preparedness, digital literacy, and pedagogical alignment.

Digital learning is widely recognised as a valuable complement to traditional education, with 64 percent of respondents¹⁶⁹ affirming its potential to allow students to learn at their own pace and receive individualised support tailored to their specific needs. It offers promising solutions to longstanding challenges in education, such as teacher shortages and student absenteeism. In some schools, digital platforms are already being used to fill critical gaps where there is an absence of subject-specialist teachers. Through remote instruction, students can access lessons delivered from other institutions, ensuring continuity in their learning even when in-person teaching is not possible.

Moreover, digital tools play a pivotal role in overcoming geographical and economic barriers, making education more inclusive and equitable.¹⁷⁰ By expanding access to learning opportunities for students in remote or marginalised communities, digital education is helping to broaden educational reach and reduce disparities, as noted by 55 percent of respondents.¹⁷¹ It is also a crucial lifeline for students who face barriers to regular school attendance due to, for example, illness, limited transportation, economic hardship, or temporary school closures. By enabling access to lessons and assignments online, digital tools help bridge the gap between students who attend school consistently and those who face interruptions in their education.¹⁷²

Another area where digital learning continues to add value is through the development and integration of high-quality digital content. The ongoing creation of digital educational resources ensures that learning materials remain relevant, flexible, and adaptable to a variety of teaching methods. These resources have become a permanent accompaniment to face-to-face instruction, reinforcing traditional pedagogical approaches with technology-driven innovations.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁵ KII Antigua and Barbuda 2, KII Barbados 3

¹⁶⁶ KII Antigua and Barbuda 5, KII Implemented Partner 1, UNICEF, 2020, 2021

¹⁶⁷ 75 respondents

¹⁶⁸ 48 respondents

¹⁶⁹ 62 respondents

¹⁷⁰ KII Turks and Caicos Island 3

¹⁷¹ 53 respondents

¹⁷² KII Trinidad and Tobago 7

¹⁷³ KII Antigua and Barbuda 2

Moreover, digital content plays a critical role in making learning more engaging and interactive, a benefit highlighted by 54 percent of respondents.¹⁷⁴ Many teachers have started to blend digital tools with conventional teaching strategies, using elements such as quiz games, multimedia, and platforms like Google Classroom and NotesMaster to extend learning beyond classroom hours. This not only reinforces lessons but also supports self-paced, autonomous learning and independent learning skills. Importantly, digital platforms are not only transforming student experiences but are also becoming vital tools for teacher development, as recognised by 55 percent of respondents.¹⁷⁵ Digital learning also allows students to personalise their learning experience and engage with content in a more interactive and flexible way (as stated by 47 percent of respondents¹⁷⁶).

Beyond individual benefits, digital platforms are increasingly seen as tools to enhance communication and connectivity, with digital learning a facilitator of collaboration and peer interaction. According to 57 percent of respondents,¹⁷⁷ these platforms enhance student-to-student communication, enabling learners to engage in group projects, academic discussions, and collaborative tasks, regardless of their physical location. This interconnectedness strengthens the sense of community in learning and promotes inclusion, particularly in remote or underserved areas.

Another significant advancement has been the growing adoption of digital assessments. Several educational institutions are including e-testing platforms, demonstrating the potential of digital learning to modernise traditional examination and evaluation methods. This shift—accelerated by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic—proves that, with adequate resources and support, schools are capable of adapting and innovating effectively in response to changing educational needs.¹⁷⁸

Despite the clear benefits of digital learning, there is a divided opinion on whether online education should become a permanent part of the system. Those in favour point to advantages such as flexibility, convenience, and accessibility (see Figure 11). Nevertheless, neither students nor teachers are fully convinced that digital education can serve as a viable long-term solution. Many value the social interactions and guided instruction that come with face-to-face learning, but express concerns about resources to access technology. Educators also share this scepticism, voicing reservations about making online education a permanent option. Despite these mixed views, many respondents recognise that digital learning remains a valuable tool for increasing accessibility and preparing students for a more technology-driven world. Digital education—alongside face-to-face learning—can be sustained, and standards and training need to keep up with the pace of change.



174 52 respondents

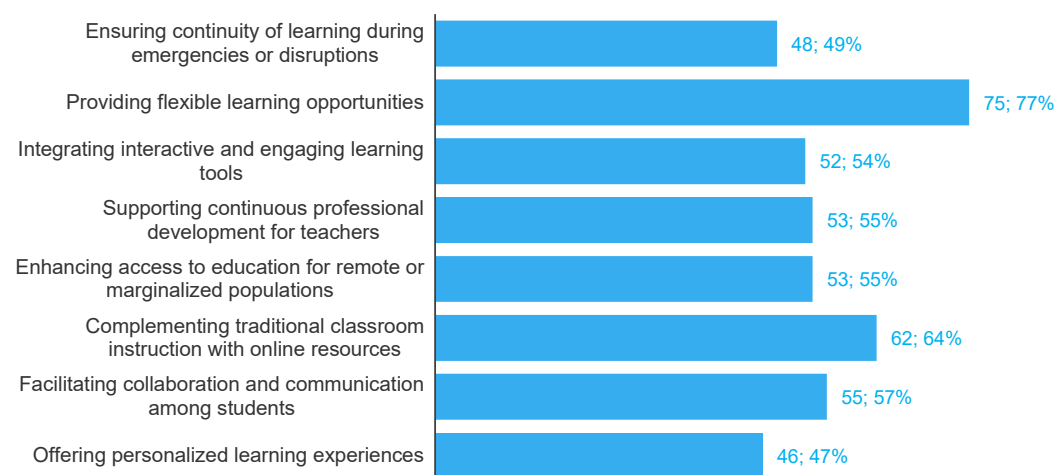
175 53 respondents

176 46 respondents

177 55 respondents

178 KII Turks and Caicos Island 3

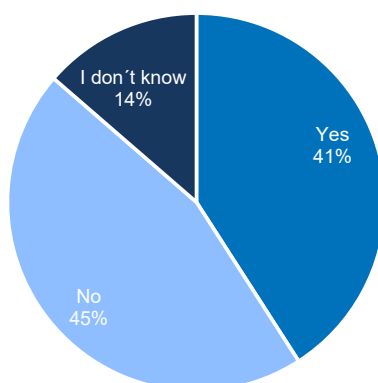
Figure 11 - Key areas where digital learning supports and enhances face-to-face education for long-term sustainability¹⁷⁹



Source: Survey UNICEF ECA COVID-19 Response Formative Evaluation

Source: Survey UNICEF ECA COVID-19 Response Formative Evaluation

Figure 12 - Perceptions on whether online classes should continue¹⁸⁰



Source: Survey UNICEF ECA COVID-19 Response Formative Evaluation

Despite various examples of UNICEF-supported initiatives being embedded into government programmes, and therefore being sustainable,¹⁸¹ over 50 percent of government survey respondents expressed uncertainty or a lack of knowledge about the long-term implementation of UNICEF supported actions.¹⁸² Respondents noted that a significant number of interventions remain aspirational rather than operationalised, with governments often articulating intentions but falling short of making concrete policy or budgetary commitments.¹⁸³ While some initiatives, as described above, have to some extent been integrated into government systems, the level of integration has varied across countries. Additionally, the recurring impact of natural hazards, such as hurricanes and volcanic eruptions in the region, has further complicated sustainability efforts. Schools are frequently damaged or repurposed as shelters, requiring continuous investment in rebuilding and maintenance. Short-term funding cycles and fragmented planning also weaken the long-term sustainability of interventions. For example, digital learning centres in Barbados continue to rely heavily on government funding and policy prioritisation, raising concerns about their long-term sustainability.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁹ The number of MoE staff respondents was 30, the number of students who responded was 53, and the number of teachers and parents was 14.

¹⁸⁰ The number of students who responded was 53, and the number of teachers and parents was 14.

¹⁸¹ MOE survey revealed

¹⁸² 15 respondents from governments survey

¹⁸³ KII UNICEF1; KII UN 1

¹⁸⁴ KII UN 1

Strengthening preparedness for more resilient education systems

In recent years, UNICEF has strengthened its EiE programmes across all Member States, particularly in response to hurricanes Irma and Maria, providing a valuable blueprint for crisis response in the education sector. This approach was further adapted and reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, helping to shape government preparedness and response frameworks, and contributing to the development of more resilient and responsive education systems. Programmes like the 'Let's Reap' Programme were introduced to assist the recovery of learning losses and strengthen future preparedness.

Guidelines, protocols, and training materials were provided to MoEs through partnerships with regional organisations, including support for school reopening, infection prevention, and education continuity. Also, through advocacy and training efforts, UNICEF, working jointly with CDEMA, supported the effective implementation of the Caribbean Safe School Framework. This collaboration also contributed to the capacity strengthening of national focal points in DRR across ten countries and territories, enhancing preparedness and institutional resilience within the education sector.¹⁸⁵ This also included development of policies and capacity across the region for schools to have effective safety and emergency management planning, and disaster risk management.¹⁸⁶

UNICEF also helped national focal points to be established within MoEs, which worked closely with the Education Development Management Unit of the OECS Commission to oversee the implementation of the OECS Education Sector Response and Recovery Strategy to COVID-19 at the country level. Moreover, through an annual planning and review process, Member States, together with education planners and Chief Education Officers, worked to ensure that key components of the regional response and recovery strategy were formally integrated into national education frameworks.¹⁸⁷

The COVID-19 crisis brought to the forefront the critical need for contingency and continuity plans in the education sector, prompting efforts to integrate disaster planning into revised education sector strategies.¹⁸⁸ UNICEF effectively leveraged its pre-existing knowledge, expertise, and strategic frameworks to support countries in strengthening preparedness and resilience across the Caribbean.

Serving as a regional blueprint, UNICEF's initiatives guided education responses through established programmes such as the Safe School Framework, giga, the 'Return to Happiness' initiative, and previous EiE programmes. These efforts played a crucial role in shaping the OECS COVID-19 Education Sector Response and Recovery Plan,¹⁸⁹ ensuring a structured and adaptive approach to educational continuity during the crisis. With this basis, education ministries developed contingency and disaster preparedness plans, and revised education sector strategies to include disaster response measures, school safety protocols, and digital learning frameworks, addressing long-standing gaps in planning and resource allocation.¹⁹⁰

Significant progress was achieved in strengthening policies, standards, and regulatory frameworks to support education continuity. Initiatives such as the CSSI framework, School Safety Protocols, the Safe School Programme, and the CCD frameworks were developed to promote safe and inclusive learning environments,¹⁹¹ and further reinforced education continuity and disaster preparedness, particularly in response to the La Soufrière (2021) volcano eruption and hurricanes.

¹⁸⁵ UNICEF RAM 2020-2022

¹⁸⁶ UNICEF 2019

¹⁸⁷ United Nations Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean 2021

¹⁸⁸ KII St. Vincent & the Grenadines 1, UNICEF (n.d)

¹⁸⁹ UNICEF RAM 2020

¹⁹⁰ KII St. Vincent & the Grenadines 1, RAM 2021

¹⁹¹ UNICEF, 2020, 2021, 2022

10

Conclusions



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Relevance

UNICEF engaged in a highly participatory way with ECA governments. Using its already close working relationship, ensured it understood their evolving needs and was able to provide support accordingly across the various phases of the pandemic. While it was not possible to undertake detailed needs assessments or analysis to inform the response and make it aligned more specifically to the needs of most vulnerable children (although efforts were made to provide for their needs), these could have been done soon after to ensure further alignment with needs. This would have been an early opportunity to start advocating to governments for commitments to put in place post-COVID-19 infrastructures related to, for example, digital learning. Further studies could have helped to identify the future needs of the cohorts whose education has suffered, including by learning loss, and to provide support in future interventions.

Coherence

UNICEF established strong partnerships with governments, NGOs, UN organisations, and regional entities from the onset of the pandemic, and continued to build upon them, which resulted in a stronger response, enabling greater reach and swifter resource mobilisation, which otherwise may not have been possible. This is testimony to UNICEF's positioning as a credible entity with the ability to bring together partners in order to achieve implementation at scale. Working in partnership, UNICEF has demonstrated its added value by focusing on targeted interventions and key strategies, including technical support. Cross-team joint working enabled the education team to leverage on interventions by other sections, which was a good strategy considering the scale of the pandemic and the response required. The fact that many of the teams continued to work in silos may have led to missed opportunities, including putting in place a strong focus on institutional coordination across programme teams for the benefit of a joint response.

Effectiveness

While not all targets under the Response Plan were fully met, UNICEF's achievements are commendable given the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Better availability of disaggregated data could have enabled UNICEF to identify, early on, progress and challenges experienced by the most vulnerable children, teachers and parents. Scaling up psychosocial support services and integrating mental health programmes proved essential in addressing stress and anxiety among students and teachers, but a lack of understanding of the challenges faced by parents, and possible support for them, was a missed opportunity and an aspect to consider in future emergency responses. Policies that embed psychosocial programmes into schools to address emotional well-being during crises will be crucial, as well as policy reforms to address administrative and legal barriers facing migrant children to ensure no child is excluded from education, particularly in emergencies.

Sustainability

It is understandable that the design stage of the COVID-19 education response was not able to account for sustainability, given that the pandemic demanded immediate action, and it was right to prioritise this. Nevertheless, measures that were progressively introduced—namely remote and then blended learning—have tremendous potential for long term sustainability, and for ensuring that education systems are more resilient to future emergencies and capable of ensuring learning continuity. This, however, can only be possible if challenges such as funding constraints within governments, internet and digital infrastructure limitations, and government commitment are addressed, otherwise the ability for education systems to respond to future emergencies may again be restricted and disruptions will affect education continuity resulting in learning loss. Furthermore, while it was not possible to include sustainability into plans for this at the start of the pandemic, UNICEF could have used its influence to advocate earlier for increased commitment from governments for building digital infrastructure.

10

Lessons Learned



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The key lessons are given below.

1

Undertaking extensive needs assessments at the onset of emergencies is not always possible given the need to immediately respond. However, drawing upon information gathered through regular consultations and close engagements, with governments—who in large scale emergencies are often the leading implementation partner—works well. Nevertheless, this does not provide nuanced information required for ongoing adjustments and hence more targeted interventions.

2

Digital learning is a valuable component to complement face-to-face education. Digital tools enhance learning by providing flexibility, personalised instruction, and access to education for students facing attendance barriers. However, they are most effective when integrated with traditional teaching rather than replacing it entirely. While digital learning has proven useful for bridging gaps in teacher availability and supporting self-paced study, many students, and educators still value in-person interaction and guided instruction.

3

While UNICEF-supported initiatives, have been successfully implemented across the ECA, such as digital learning, hygiene measures, and psychosocial support programmes, this does not guarantee consistent integration by all governments. Some governments will prioritise digital education and hybrid learning, while others have deprioritised these efforts due to financial constraints. The long-term sustainability of these programmes depends on continuous government commitment, funding, and policy alignment to ensure they are not just temporary responses but permanent solutions.

4

While UNICEF's initiatives, such as Giga and NotesMaster, have significantly improved digital learning infrastructure and accessibility, long-term sustainability depends on consistent government commitment. Challenges such as slow bandwidth, limited devices, and gaps in ICT management persist, particularly in underfunded schools. Without clear policies, centralised regulation, and sustained financial investment, digital education risks becoming fragmented and inequitable.

5

Parental involvement in children's education is crucial; and even more so in emergencies, when schools are closed. Programmes that actively involve parents, for example in early learning initiatives, demonstrated positive results and more engagement and support is required to strengthen household-level preparedness for emergencies.

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Priority/ Timeframe
1.	Scheduling of evaluations: This evaluation took place some time after the COVID-19 interventions and, while useful for future emergency programming, UNICEF should consider commissioning evaluations immediately after the interventions to increase the utility and learning. For course correction, UNICEF could undertake light touch reviews during the response which would inform the evaluations as well as required adaptations within the ongoing response.	UNICEF CO and RO	Immediate (after each intervention and midway with light touch review)
2.	Expanding access to digital learning: Strengthen policy commitments, and national education frameworks: To ensure the education sector maximises gains made from the use of digital learning during the pandemic, sufficient funding, policies and frameworks are needed at regional and country levels. UNICEF could incorporate this into its upstream work and through its advocacy work target donors and governments whilst providing technical guidance through specialist teams/consultants. Digital infrastructure and access: Expand investments in digital infrastructure to ensure equitable access to technology and internet connectivity, particularly in rural and underserved communities. This includes developing and implementing sustainable digital learning strategies, including device maintenance plans and affordable internet solutions. It would require collaboration with telecommunications providers to reduce costs and improve connectivity for disadvantaged students. This would be the responsibility of governments, but UNICEF can incorporate it into its advocacy work and provide technical assistance.	UNICEF Governments International organisations Donors Private sector	Immediate to long term
3	Develop contingency plans for education disruptions: Establish emergency education plans incorporating hybrid and alternative learning solutions. This will require securing funding for rebuilding schools and maintaining digital learning continuity after disasters. In addition, it will require developing technology-based disaster preparedness strategies to minimise educational disruptions.	UNICEF Governments Education Agencies Donors	Immediate to long term
4	Promote inclusive education for marginalised groups, including those with special needs: Strengthen education policies and interventions to ensure equitable access to education for migrant children, children with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. This involves developing targeted interventions that integrate assistive technologies and inclusive learning materials, as well as establishing long-term frameworks to institutionalise inclusive education policies and training programmes.	UNICEF NGOs Field Offices Governments	Short to long term
5	Improve data-driven decision-making and programme monitoring: Enhance data collection systems to track education outcomes, particularly for marginalised groups, including strengthening monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess programme effectiveness and guide policy adjustments. In addition, promote cross-sector collaboration to integrate education data into broader social policy frameworks.	UNICEF Governments Research Institutions Academia	Short to long term
6	Institutionalise mental health and psychosocial support in education systems: Expand the integration of mental health and psychosocial support into school programmes, including teacher training and student counselling services. This includes developing child-friendly and culturally relevant mental health resources for students and educators and embedding mental health support as a core component of national education frameworks.	UNICEF Ministries of Education NGOs International Organisations	Immediate to long term



For further information, please contact:

United Nations Children's Fund

First Floor, UN House,

Marine Gardens

Christ Church, Barbados

bridgetown@unicef.org

www.unicef.org/easterncaribbean