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In Madagascar, school closures undertaken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have affected more than 7 million children and 244,000 teachers. Even before the pandemic, only one out of three Malagasy children were completing primary education, and the recent school closures are exacerbating a protracted learning crisis that plagues the country.

On 22 April 2020, the government reopened schools for pupils enrolled in grades 3, 7 and 12,¹ prioritising those grades that require examinations to earn a certification or promotion to the next academic level. However, on 23 July, schools closed again due to a rise in COVID-19 cases in three regions, including the capital of Antananarivo, and the exams were postponed across the country to September and October. As of 14 August, schools continue to operate at partial capacity. Of the seven regions where UNICEF works in the education sector, two remain closed. In the five regions that are active again, close to 95 per cent of children enrolled in the reopened grades have returned to school.

The joint [Framework for reopening schools](#) guided the country's reopening plans, and key features are set out below.

KEY FEATURES

- **Putting learning at the centre** – While safe operations are critical, the ultimate goal is to ensure that all children are learning. Since before the pandemic, UNICEF has supported Madagascar's catch-up programmes, where each year the regions identify children who have dropped out and encourage their return to school. These children take an exam to evaluate which grade they will reintegrate into, and they learn essential competencies such as Malagasy, French and Mathematics. With current school closures, and together with these catch-up programmes, ongoing support includes blended learning for children who will continue with classes offered over the radio, TV or other platforms. As of 29 July, 600,000 pupils were accessing radio and tv programming as modes of home-based learning. Furthermore, UNICEF supported the production of 600,000 self-study guides, of which 300,000 have already been distributed. For secondary-level students, these booklets included course summaries, exercises and devices for assessing student achievement through self-correcting quizzes.

¹ Grades 3, 7 and 12 in the French system are equivalent to the last grade of primary school (7th), last grade of junior high school (3rd) and last grade of high school (Terminal).

- **Championing inclusion in school reopening** – The remedial catch-up programmes also urge the return to school for girls and children with disabilities. To integrate these vulnerable students in the next catch-up class campaign, UNICEF is working to strengthen awareness, clarify messaging and advocate for the continued sign-language translation of televised educational programming. Additionally, a cash programme in some regions is available to reduce the financial burden on families and support access to schools. While the mid-term evaluation shows some success at the primary level for boys, the programme is limited in the lower secondary level. This support is part of a global national social policy programme and will be scaled up according to availability of funds.

- **Prioritising safety when reopening schools**

– School opening was phased to facilitate physical distancing. For those returning, the government supplied masks to students and teachers. UNICEF complemented these measures by assisting regional governments to disinfect school buildings and establish temporary storage facilities. UNICEF has also worked to improve handwashing stations in schools and deliver hygiene kits that include soap, cleaning supplies and posters to promote good hygiene. As of 7 July, about 98,280 classrooms, or 69 per cent of schools in 17 out of the 22 regions of Madagascar, had been disinfected.



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- **Wellbeing and protection** – Reopening plans need to be holistic to give precedence to safety and learning. Protection concerns, such as gender-based violence in schools and child marriage, are being addressed through child hotlines. To mitigate economic fallout, the UNICEF-supported social protection programme, *Tosiko Famino*, has reached 240,000 families whose livelihoods have been damaged by the pandemic. To learn more, see this [video](#).

EMERGENT LESSONS LEARNED

- **Design gradual return plans that take into account distancing.** A gradual return prevents overwhelming the system, provides learning opportunities and makes physical distancing feasible. When planning for the reopening, distancing criteria are parameters to make other decisions. For example, block-scheduling, double shifts or blended learning (e.g., some subjects or days at school and some from home) might be necessary. Additionally, protocols should be put in place for when supplies are unavailable or delayed, including clear guidelines on homemade masks if government-issued ones run out and alternatives when a school lacks access to running water or soap.
- **Be flexible.** As exemplified by schools opening and then reclosing, reopening is not a single date but rather a gradual process. Plans should be flexible since the pandemic may not play out in a linear way. For example, if COVID-19 cases increase, the school calendar could change, or there could be a need to switch back to home-based learning.
- **Develop clear pedagogical guidelines.** To promote effective learning for all children, pedagogical guidelines must go hand-in-hand with operation, logistic and sanitary procedures, working to promote adequate education delivery, learning and certification after confinement and recovery periods. Through a Global Partnership for Education grant,

the government also plans to distribute tablets to teachers particularly in remote areas to help them access pedagogical information and improve their professional competencies.

- **Tailor distance learning and engage families.** Distance learning platforms should be personalised to local conditions, as new technologies are not prevalent and access to radio, TV, internet and mobile phones varies across regions. Greater efforts are also needed to engage parents and communities, which is vital to the success of remote learning. This remains a hurdle because of poverty: most parents have one priority and that is feeding their families.
- **Improve infrastructure and delivery systems.** Deficient infrastructure remains a major obstacle to education delivery and to healthy, protective environments for children during and after emergencies. To better serve the evolving needs of students and teachers, the government must develop a plan and re-think the new requirements of school buildings; for example, more multi-purpose classrooms and dedicated space for library or individual study could provide more flexible environments that cater to pupils attending regular classes and those in catch-up programmes. More work is needed to ensure that water and sanitation facilities in schools are gender-sensitive, and the unique needs of children with disabilities are being met. The difficulties in expeditious delivery to schools illuminates the necessity of improving those systems and their supply chains, now and for future emergencies.
- **Build more resilient systems.** Each year, Malagasy children’s learning is affected by emergencies – such as drought, diseases, floods and cyclones – and longer-term sector planning is needed to address learning loss due to these overlapping emergencies. As the pandemic evolves, the government needs a reliable strategy for distance education, as well as the capacity to shift from in-person education to remote learning when required. UNICEF Madagascar continues to work with government partners to further develop their capacity to provide quality distance education. Indeed, the reopening of schools provides a unique opportunity to reimagine education in Madagascar that is safer and more equitable, resilient and accessible to all girls and boys.

OTHER RESOURCES

For other resources, including more case studies, please click [here](#) and filter by “Area of Work” (Education).

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