The COVID-19 pandemic and associated school closures exposed weaknesses in Tajikistan’s institutional and infrastructural capacities to provide digital learning for schoolchildren. Realising the potential of technology to improve learning outcomes, UNICEF worked with the Government to develop a comprehensive national strategy for digital learning. With funding from the European Union (EU), UNICEF also addressed specific digital transformation enablers such as connectivity, access to devices and the need for platform development.

UNICEF Tajikistan is homing in on teaching and learning, introducing new blended approaches supported by teacher innovation centers at national and regional levels, as part of the ongoing reform of teacher professional development. In parallel, UNICEF supported the development of three distinct digital platforms to meet national requirements: the Learning Passport for pre-primary students; Maktab Mobile, a localised platform for primary and secondary learners; and Omuzgor Mobile for teacher training. These platforms enable offline sharing between digital devices without internet and inclusive education functionalities such as talkback and video subtitle support. Developed with limited connectivity in mind, the offline solutions will enable users with low internet bandwidth to access e-learning courses, video-based lessons and other content and features such as built-in learning assessments and automatic progress tracking. With funding from the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), UNICEF is also working on establishing an e-library to serve as a repository of digital resources that can be accessed through these platforms.

To ensure evidence-based policymaking, UNICEF helped conduct a country-wide assessment of connectivity, equipment and capacities among national, regional and district educational institutions. The assessment revealed that less than 20 per cent of schools had internet access, and digital standards were missing on how to use and maintain existing learning devices. This informed the development of a national digital road map in 2021—in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), Ministry of Industry and New Technologies and the State Agency of Telecommunications, as well as other line ministries and state agencies—with a detailed action plan and financing for digital transformation.
To draw in additional resources and partnerships, UNICEF’s GIGA initiative, together with the EU and MoES, is mapping the real time connectivity of all 3,940 schools in Tajikistan to develop an investment case for school connectivity to be supported by international financial institutions and the private sector. This will serve as a foundation to work with service providers to connect every school to digital learning.

RESULTS

- Recently launched in May 2022, the UNICEF-supported Learning Passport (known as Magic Box in Tajikistan) is expected to reach 890,000 children (45 per cent girls) ages 3 to 6 in the 2022-2023 academic year, providing learning and development activities such as games, online story books, videos and additional support for parents of children with learning disabilities. These resources are accessible online and offline through mobile phones.

- The scale up of the UNICEF-supported Maktab Mobile platform will be available for 2,195,619 primary and secondary learners in Tajikistan in the 2022-2023 school year. Students, teachers and parents can access these digital resources offline as well as via web browsers, mobile phones and apps.

- UNICEF is supporting the MoES to train 10,000 teachers, or nearly 8 per cent of all primary and secondary school teachers in the country, in digital teaching practices. This includes scaling up the Omuzgor Mobile platform to augment blended learning approaches as well as the continuous professional development of teachers.

- Building on the 2021 national assessment, UNICEF is now modelling low-cost devices, such as tablets and single board computers, in 100 primary and secondary schools across the country, with an inclusive education focus.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Government buy-in and institutional reform are key to effective digital learning strategies. Without systems-level reform and resources, the development of digital competencies and use of digital technologies in teaching and learning processes remain untenable and unscalable.

- Teachers and parents can underestimate the impact of technology on student learning. Parents’ lack of digital skills must be addressed. Awareness raising and provision of information and education are essential steps.

- Well-designed digital solutions can supplement best practices for teaching. Digital solutions should expand and enhance teaching practices, blending online learning and face-to-face teaching, for the best learning outcomes.

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, UNICEF has been working with private sector and Government to develop locally appropriate, quality digital learning content and to improve connectivity and access to devices. To provide more young children with access to early learning, the MoES plans to scale up the Learning Passport reach to every early childhood education teacher and parent in Tajikistan, benefitting a total number of 1.5 million children under 6 years of age. By bolstering the capacity of in-service teacher training institutes, UNICEF will also continue to work with the Government to modernise teacher professional development pathways and better prepare them on how to use technologies for learning in schools.

Cost effectiveness: Since 2020, UNICEF Tajikistan has contributed approximately US $7.6 million on digital learning, including in-service teacher training on blended learning, launch of three digital platforms, mapping of school connectivity and purchase of tablets. These resources, together with contributions from the EU, IsDB and the Global Partnership for Education, are helping to reach nearly 2.2 million learners (48 per cent girls) and 129,000 teachers.