Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in South Asia

Sub-regional Report
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The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations’ specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.
Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in South Asia

Sub-regional Report

October 2021
Foreword

The pandemic caused a major children's rights crisis: all service sectors being profoundly impacted, with the most disadvantaged being disproportionately affected.

COVID-19 – possibly the largest pandemic the world has ever seen – led to an economic crisis probably more radical and global than ever before; as well as disruption of learning on an unprecedented scale. The pandemic caused a major children’s rights crisis: all service sectors being profoundly impacted, with the most disadvantaged being disproportionately affected.

In response, with support from the Global Partnership for Education, UNICEF and UNESCO joined forces with Mott MacDonald, Cambridge Education to carry out a situation analysis, primarily to generate analyses to inform strategic responses to the crisis going forward. While the extension and duration of the pandemic required to invest more time to produce the final analyses and reports, fortunately information had already been discussed through webinars and national conversations with Ministries of Education and other partners across large parts of the Asia Pacific region.

Furthermore, the reports continue to be of utmost relevance given subsequent waves of COVID-19 sweeping across the world in 2021 and very likely in 2022 as well. The task of learning from the crisis and how to mitigate its effects in education is on-going. More than one academic year has now been lost for many children. To ensure continuity of learning whilst schools are closed, the delivery of education is radically changing today through distance education: digital, blended or hybrid learning have become part of the new learning reality which all Governments, teachers and learners will have to adjust to.

While major efforts are needed to mitigate the learning loss of those children who return to school in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase, we must also remember that many children were not learning before the crisis and several million were not even in schools. The reports therefore also explore opportunities to build back better and to re-imagine education; to shift from fact-based didactic methodologies to competency-based approaches, which are more flexible, better respond to the holistic needs and aspirations of all children, and provide opportunities for life-long learning as per the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 agenda.

While the suite of reports provided within the Regional Situation Analysis are particularly relevant to the Asia Pacific region, contexts of course vary considerably across our huge region. At the same time, the reports may also provide insights that are relevant to other regions around the world. Hopefully the findings, including the country case studies, and regional budget needs analysis will help governments resume and accelerate progress towards SDG 4. The way education is conceptualized and delivered is changing fast, and the transformation journey will be steep and full of challenges. Governments, donors, all partners and the private sector will need to work together, not only to get the strategies and levels of investment right, but to build more resilient, effective and inclusive systems, able to deliver on the promise of education as a fundamental human right for all children, whether schools are open or closed.

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UNICEF East Asia Pacific

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Regional Director
UNICEF South Asia
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# List of acronyms

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<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>BRAC</td>
<td>Building Resources Across Communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBE</td>
<td>Community-Based Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>COVID-19</td>
<td>Coronavirus disease</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECE</td>
<td>Early childhood education</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECD</td>
<td>Early childhood development</td>
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<tr>
<td>EMIS</td>
<td>Education Management Information System</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESQID</td>
<td>Educational Supervision and Quality Improvement Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEM</td>
<td>Global Education Monitoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and communications technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPC</td>
<td>Infection Prevention and Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>LTR</td>
<td>Learner-teacher ratio</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoH</td>
<td>Ministry of Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>MHPSS</td>
<td>Mental health and psychosocial support</td>
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<tr>
<td>NASA</td>
<td>National Assessment of Student Achievements</td>
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<td>NCD</td>
<td>Non-communicable disease</td>
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<td>NCERT</td>
<td>National Council for Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>ODA</td>
<td>Overseas Development Assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOPs</td>
<td>Standard operating procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCB</td>
<td>Universal Child Benefit</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNOCHA</td>
<td>United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>WASH</td>
<td>Water, sanitation and hygiene</td>
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<tr>
<td>WFP</td>
<td>World Food Programme</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive summary

Background

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic makes it unique, affecting the whole world with the twin shocks of a health emergency and an economic recession. This will lead to long-term costs on human capital accumulation, development prospects and welfare. The pandemic has affected all parts of the world and the responses to the situation have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society.

This situation analysis has been undertaken as part of the broader analysis initiated by UNICEF and UNESCO to provide a snapshot of the educational responses and effects of COVID-19 across Asia. It considers the direct effects of school closures and reopenings and identifies the initial impact that this may have had on learners and their families, as well as on the overall education system. The South Asia report builds on country case studies for all eight countries in the sub-region.

The objectives of the study are: to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector and stakeholders in Asia; to examine the policy and financial implications on progress towards achieving SDG 4-Education 2030; and to identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors, which can be shared with other countries.

COVID-19 in South Asia

The first cases of COVID-19 appeared in South Asia in February 2020. A year later the pandemic is still affecting lives in the region. “India is the second most impacted country in the world after the United States but with much fewer recorded deaths,” whereas other countries, particularly those with areas of lower population density and natural geographical barriers, like Afghanistan and Bhutan, managed to keep the numbers of infections and deaths low. Maldives have had proportionately the most infections per 100,000 of the population, followed by India (following the mutation of the virus in May 2021) and Nepal. The number of reported deaths due to COVID-19 in each of the South Asian countries, apart from Afghanistan and Pakistan, have been kept relatively low throughout the region.

As would be expected, the pandemic was seen first and foremost as a health emergency with actions taken to keep lives safe. All countries imposed a lockdown on their populations which closed schools, businesses, industry, shops and affected all aspects of people’s lives, including access to health care. These measures, while protecting lives, had a major impact on the economy and also on household finances: it prevented many people from earning money, and while social protection systems were mobilized and reached some of the population, they were not enough to support all families, leaving many people vulnerable.

World Bank 2014 figures put the number of people in poverty in South Asia at 15.2 per cent, against a baseline of $1.90 per day. This was a significant decrease from 48.7 per cent in 1990, and poverty levels had continued to decline throughout the region. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens this progress as people become more vulnerable to falling further or back into poverty.

The main policy response to affect children was the closure of schools. Apart from Maldives, schools throughout South Asia were fully closed for longer than the global average. Education across the region was disrupted by the initial school closures, partial reopenings and more closures as infections spiked again. Most countries in the region prioritized older children for return to school as they were facing high-stakes exams. Evidence on child development suggests, however, that the youngest children were those most in need of face-to-face interaction and should have been the first back in school. Children throughout the region have had their schooling disrupted for over a year, and have been reliant on being able to access alternative provision for education, which did not reach every learner and was no substitute for face-to-face contact.
Participation and learning in South Asia

Across the region, countries have made significant strides towards improving enrolment, with some significant successes. For example, more girls are now in school and there are decreasing numbers of out-of-school children, but there are still many children excluded from education, including young children, children with disabilities and those from marginalized groups. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, girls’ enrolment still remains a challenge, with the gap compared to boys increasing as children move through school. Financing for pre-primary education is low in low income and lower-middle-income countries, which affects the quality and amount of provision for young children. Pre-primary enrolment varied across the region, with over 80 per cent gross enrolment in Maldives, Nepal, and Pakistan and below 50 per cent in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan (2018-2020). Inclusive education for children with disabilities is also high on the agenda for the countries in the region but, while there are pockets of good practice, there is still a long way to go before all children with disabilities are in schools with their learning needs adequately met, as shown by a recent mapping done in South Asia by UNICEF.

While the figures above show the achievements that countries have made in bringing children, especially girls, into school over the past 20 years, there is more to be done across the region to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 target for 2030. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent policy responses threaten this progress as children have been out of school for long periods of time, increasing the risk of dropout from all levels of education.

Despite this progress in improving access for children, the quality of education and low levels of learning remain an issue for the region. Young children and children with disabilities were not getting the stimulus from home that they need for the development of vital skills. Data from 2019 showed that 58 per cent of children in South Asia were in Learning Poverty, unable to read and understand a short, age-appropriate text by age 10 prior to COVID-19.

Health, well-being and protection

A UNICEF report on the situation of children in South Asia highlighted some of the health and protection issues which affect the lives of children and their participation in education in different ways, including inequalities in immunization coverage, children being left in inadequate care and being subjected to violence. In addition, malnutrition is prevalent across South Asia and negatively impacts children’s access and performance in education. Around 73 million schoolchildren in low-income countries go to school hungry. These conditions translate into the equivalent of between 200 million and 500 million school days lost to ill health each year.

Effects of COVID-19

“School closures kept 391 million students out of school in South Asia, with 22 million young children missing their pre-school year.”

One of the effects of long school closures is the likely increase in the number of learners dropping out of school. All countries in the region, after closing schools, quickly developed plans and took action to enable children to continue learning and reach vast numbers of learners. Despite this quick response, learning loss will be high for many children across the region. Those particularly affected by the crisis and impacted by a technological response will be girls and those marginalized groups, with little access to technology, “There is also a significant gender digital divide, with girls far less likely to own or have access to digital devices and fewer opportunities to gain digital literacy skills.”

A UNICEF report in 2020 ‘Children with Disabilities: Ensuring their inclusion in COVID-19 response strategies and evidence generation’ showed how the exclusion of children with disabilities from learning has also been exacerbated, as learning has shifted to remote and online delivery. The report recommends additional research to understand the impact of the pandemic on children with disabilities. However, they are likely to remain invisible in data collection efforts, unless dedicated measures are put in place to make such efforts disability-inclusive.

Long periods of school closure and the resulting lack of face-to-face contact, in addition to unequal or inappropriate access to alternatives (especially for the youngest children and children with disabilities), will have significant effects on the students’ performance, particularly for the most marginalized children. In a context where many children were already learning below the expected grade level, the effects of the crisis will make it even more challenging for countries to reach the 2030 SDG 4 targets for learning.
In 2020, essential services affecting children and adolescents were severely reduced or ceased as a result of the pandemic. Potential disruption of health systems along with decreased access to food (from disrupted school feeding programmes as well as reductions in family income) could lead to as much as a 44 per cent increase in monthly deaths of children under 5 across 188 low- and middle-income countries. Research has demonstrated that children with disabilities and their families are more likely to be subjected to hunger and poverty. They are among children prone to underlying health conditions and not only face the increased risk of serious complications from COVID-19, but are likely to face obstacles in accessing the support and response measures they need.

During school closures, children face social isolation and increased levels of stress. This is also a concern for children with disabilities, and those with existing mental health issues. Those with working parents or caregivers may be forced to stay home alone, which puts them at risk of a wide range of protection issues. An increased level of domestic violence against women and children and children with disabilities, (e.g., in the form of child labour, trafficking for sexual exploitation), damages their physical, emotional and mental well-being as prolonged stress has been shown to impair students’ learning and threaten their future development.

For girls in the region, there is an increased likelihood of child marriage when they are out of school, and an increase in adolescent pregnancies at a time when maternity care is reduced, and health resources are repurposed to COVID-19. This is likely to result in a rise in communicable disease-related adolescent mortality.

Safe operations and reopening of schools

While a UNICEF report notes “the past decade also saw greater government commitments and increased investments for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in schools,” it is concerning that up to 50 per cent of low-income countries do not have enough resources to offer adequate protection to all pupils and staff, according to a recent survey of 113 countries, carried out by the World Bank and UN agencies in October 2020. This lack of adequate WASH facilities presents a major barrier to schools reopening, as without basic hygiene facilities, schools, children and teachers will be unable to follow these guidelines for safe school reopening, particularly the critical ones around handwashing and sanitation.
Across the region, all governments worked together with UNICEF to develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) for schools, based on WHO’s checklist for safe opening. Local authorities, school leaders, teachers’ unions, community leaders, school staff, teachers, parents and caregivers were expected to use these guidelines to make decisions over when and how to open schools and how to keep schools open safely, especially for the most vulnerable children.

**Financial analysis**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant fiscal policy challenges, which are set to continue until longer-term solutions to the pandemic are found.

The impact of COVID-19 in 2020 on economic growth is striking, with an average -4.3 per cent real change in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While Bangladesh (3.8 per cent), Bhutan (0.6 per cent), and Nepal (0 per cent) managed to avoid a contraction in GDP, their GDP growth still slowed to significantly lower rates than before the pandemic.

The other countries in the sub-region all experienced contractions in GDP, with India (-10.3 per cent) and Maldives (-18.6 per cent) the worst affected. Within this context of deteriorated fiscal balances at the same time as increased expenditure demands to support economic recovery, the IMF stresses the risk that other critical public expenditures, notably on education, may be crowded out. In fact, UNICEF reported that more than a third of low- and lower-middle-income countries have either already experienced or anticipate decreases to their education budget for the current or next fiscal year.

Countries with relatively low education budgets are generally at higher risk of falling education outcomes as those systems likely suffer the most from under-investment. On the other hand, countries with relatively higher education budgets likely have stronger, more resilient systems and a sufficient funding base to allow governments to better respond to the impacts of COVID-19 through funding reallocation or budget reprioritization.

The required responses to the COVID-19 shocks represent a large proportional increase in financing for these countries with low education budget baselines. Moreover, budget reprioritization away from the education sector would further undermine education outcomes in these countries with relatively low education budget baselines.

There are large variations in the cumulative effect of the COVID-19 shock across countries, which are representative of the relative size of the countries in the sub-region, as well as the particular impacts of COVID-19 on their education systems. The budget shocks are a function of the severity of the school closures and the health of education systems pre-COVID-19. For the baseline scenario, the impacts of COVID-19 have extended countries’ 2020-2030 education budgets by 4.6 per cent in Bhutan to 44 per cent in Bangladesh (see Chapter 2). The budget shocks are still proportionally large in the optimistic scenario, ranging from 3.4 per cent of the 2020-2030 budget in Bhutan to 34.3 per cent of the 2020-2030 budget in Bangladesh (see Chapter 2).

UNICEF highlights that 95 per cent of the 149 surveyed countries reported that additional financial resources were required to ensure an adequate response to COVID-19 for education. Low- and lower-middle-income countries that were able to partially or fully meet these financing needs, commonly funded them through a combination of additional domestic financing and external donors, and in high-income countries through budget reallocations.
Challenges, positive responses, and lessons learned

Despite the diversity of South Asia, most countries had the same objectives which were to keep children and teachers safe and ensure continuity of learning. This assessment identified five common challenges that countries faced in trying to achieve this. The extent to which these challenges affected learning varied across countries.

A webinar was held with government and donor partners from across the sub-region to present the findings of this analysis and to validate these with countries’ more recent experiences. Feedback from countries during the webinar are included in this report.

FIVE COMMON CHALLENGES FACED BY COUNTRIES

1. Reopening schools safely
2. Reaching the most marginalized
3. Existing low levels of learning and the learning divide
4. Health, well-being, and protection
5. Existing poverty levels

COLLABORATION
Where there was good vertical or horizontal collaboration, information sharing and community level mobilization, including of teachers and parents, schools were better able to safely implement school reopening.

FINANCE
Across most systems there were insufficient funds to provide adequate WASH facilities, training and procurement of safety materials such as soap and sanitizer.

MONITORING
There were few systems collecting real-time data about safe school reopening. Monitoring compliance with SOPs, as well as learning, was identified as a challenge during the South Asia webinar.
SITUATION ANALYSIS

Positive responses:
All eight South Asian countries developed school reopening guidelines and put checklists in place for schools and sub-national authorities to monitor their implementation. Across the region significant efforts have been made to improve schools’ WASH facilities, which had been previously neglected in many schools. In some countries this has required the repurposing of existing funds for the construction of WASH facilities, plus cleaning and sanitizing once schools have reopened.

Within the region, Sri Lanka is one of the countries which has demonstrated noticeable success in managing a swift and effective response to COVID-19 in terms of safe school closure and reopening by using cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination, increased financing and cross-sectoral monitoring.

Challenge 1: Reopening schools safely and effectively

While clear guidelines and standard operating procedures (SOPs) help guide school communities in the multiple facets of safe operations, putting this into practice was difficult across the region where classrooms are often overcrowded, with many schools having inadequate or non-existent WASH facilities.

Across the region, countries struggled at all levels to collect and use real-time, disaggregated data on the status of safety in each school. This aligns with the feedback from countries at the South Asia webinar, on the three challenges they faced in keeping schools open safely: training teachers and school staff; and monitoring the roll-out of school reopening as well as compliance with SOPs.

Positive responses: All eight South Asian countries developed school reopening guidelines and put checklists in place for schools and sub-national authorities to monitor their implementation. Across the region significant efforts have been made to improve schools’ WASH facilities, which had been previously neglected in many schools. In some countries this has required the repurposing of existing funds for the construction of WASH facilities, plus cleaning and sanitizing once schools have reopened.

Within the region, Sri Lanka is one of the countries which has demonstrated noticeable success in managing a swift and effective response to COVID-19 in terms of safe school closure and reopening by using cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination, increased financing and cross-sectoral monitoring.

Lessons learned on safe school reopening

1. Protocols and guidelines for reopening schools safely were developed, yet the extent to which they were implemented is unclear and hampered by resource constraints.
2. Adapting national plans to local contexts and involving all stakeholders improves teacher, student and parental confidence for the safe reopening of schools.
3. Current monitoring systems don’t provide information on whether schools are safe or not and don’t link health and education data together.
Challenge 2: Reaching the most marginalized

Across the region, access to, and participation in, learning while schools were closed was inequitable. The two main challenges countries faced were identifying their most vulnerable and marginalized children and understanding their needs, and then addressing these needs effectively. Governments lacked the data they needed to identify and target different groups of marginalized learners. Each learner faced their own challenges, including young learners, those with disabilities, girls, those who speak minority languages or a combination of these factors. For already-marginalized children, their difficulties in accessing and meaningfully participating in learning during school closures were exacerbated.

For the purposes of this situation analysis, marginalized and vulnerable children include: those living in households in extreme poverty including those in urban slum areas; children from disadvantaged households such as remote or hard-to-reach areas or those who speak a minority language; children at risk of drop out and exploitation, girls at risk of early marriage and pregnancy, children on the move (migrants and refugees); children with physical disabilities and those with special learning needs; and very young children. These are the children who are most likely to be affected by the policy responses to the situation.

Many of the education systems in the region are large and centralized and, as a result, were somewhat less flexible in adapting to the myriad of vulnerabilities affecting the most marginalized groups and responding to the diversity of situations on the ground in terms of infection rates, etc. In these circumstances, the implementation of centrally-developed plans tended to be the responsibility of sub-national and school-level actors. Local actors had the knowledge and experience of their context and communities and were able to reach further into communities. The challenge with this local approach, however, was that its effectiveness was uneven as it depended on the priorities, enthusiasm, capacity and presence of local actors within communities, which resulted in some marginalized communities becoming more disadvantaged as a result.

There is a vast digital divide across the region, adversely affecting the most marginalized children. Just 13 per cent of children and young people have access to internet at home, with the poorest and those living in rural areas having far less access than their richer and more urban peers. The lack of access to devices, electricity and internet was well known and alternative learning approaches had to be developed, but providing access doesn’t mean children can participate or learn. The youngest learners, whose reading skills are yet to be developed fully, had particular challenges accessing and participating in remote learning, and required intense support from parents or caregivers. A UNICEF survey, which was borne out in the country case studies for this situation analysis, found that only three out of the eight countries in South Asia reported adopting specific measures to support the learning of children with disabilities.

Positive responses: In Afghanistan, the Education in Emergencies Working Group was able to quickly develop paper-based self-learning guides for the community teachers to use with their learners through Community-Based Education (CBE). Materials, largely focused on revision, were developed centrally and teachers were trained on the materials and messages around COVID-19. They then visited families to deliver weekly learning packs and supported children. The approach was supported by the community and meant that learners were able to continue learning. In Bhutan, the Government put the protection of the most vulnerable communities at the centre of the country’s national response plan. Children with disabilities were granted a special pass from the Government so that they could spend some time outside during lockdown. School reopening guidelines in Bhutan included a check on whether the schools have provided additional support for children at risk and with disabilities.

Lessons learned on reaching the most marginalized

1. Reaching the most marginalized required a range of delivery mechanisms.
2. Countries need stronger monitoring systems in place to enable them to identify marginalized children and the challenges they face so that they can put effective measures in place to overcome these challenges.
3. To reach the most marginalized, local solutions are needed so local capacity is essential for informed decision making.
4. Full participation can only be achieved when it is a clear focus of education planning.
Challenge 3: Existing low levels of learning and the learning divide

Prior to the pandemic levels of learning were not high for most across South Asia. Teachers, parents and students were largely unprepared for this switch to remote learning. This change in modality, alongside increased external pressures on households, has presented some key challenges for meeting learning needs both during school closures and on return to school.

- Pre-primary children are the most in need of face-to-face support but were not prioritized.
- Many parents struggled to help their children with home learning.
- Teachers faced multiple demands on their time but received very little training and support.
- When learners return to schools, the unevenness of provision means that it is likely there will be wider disparities in what they know, understand and can do, which will need to be addressed as schools reopen.

Governments and teachers have limited data available on the extent of the learning loss and teachers are often unprepared to deal with individual learners’ specific needs with whole class didactic teaching often the norm.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were expected to embrace a new way of teaching, which involved less contact with students and a combination of approaches, including, high-tech, low-tech and no-tech modalities. Many teachers were also asked to be the main contact point between the system and households, monitoring health, well-being and protection issues as well as supporting learning. This role expansion increased teachers’ workload and demanded that they used a range of skills, for which they were mostly unprepared. Many teachers faced competing demands on their own time and lacked the protected space and time they needed to work effectively from home.

As schools reopen it will not be sufficient for teachers to continue teaching the curriculum with the assumption that children are at the same point as they would have been without this extended period away from school. This presents two major challenges for teachers and curriculum planners:

1. How to assess the levels of learners knowledge and skills, then provide remediation through teaching at the right level.
2. How to adapt the curriculum so that there is coverage of essential subjects and items and learning loss is not increased.

Positive responses: In Bhutan, during school closures the Government developed an adapted curriculum which focused on core foundational skills in primary and combined subjects at the higher grades to reduce coverage, with remote assessment having been planned into the programme. In Bangladesh, UNICEF and Chittagong Development Board had worked in partnership on a pre-primary programme prior to COVID-19. Once COVID-19 struck, they formed a technical group and developed a two-month curriculum, focused on basic learning activities including health, hygiene and protection, supported by basic learning materials for any parent to use at home. They built the capacity of para workers who then held orientations with parents. Pre-COVID-19 they had found it difficult to engage parents with the programme, but during the crisis parents became much more involved in their children’s learning.

Lessons learned on existing low levels of learning and the learning divide

1. The pandemic has exacerbated the existing learning gap.
2. Narrowing the learning gap will depend upon the skills of the teachers and how they are able to assess and teach children at their right level so that they can progress.
3. Teachers needed to have adequate preparation and training to enable them to manage remote learning.
4. A pre-COVID-19 focus on teachers improving students’ 21st century skills could have built the competencies that learners needed to be more independent and therefore help them cope better with remote learning.
5. Building assessment into remote learning programmes is critical to enable a smooth transition between remote and classroom learning.
6. The curriculum needs to be flexible to allow for significantly different levels of learning on return to school.
7. The majority of countries across South Asia use a traditional way of teaching based upon a centralized syllabus and it could be argued that this hampered teachers’ ability to be flexible and adaptable.
8. Pre-primary children needed to be prioritized for remote provision which suited their needs and that of their caregivers, and prioritized when schools reopened so that they returned to face-to-face learning as soon as possible.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“"The priority for all South Asian governments is to contain the virus spread and protect their people, especially the poorest who face considerably worse health and economic outcomes.""^{33}

Challenge 4: Health, well-being, and protection

Many countries in South Asia had existing emergency response plans prior to the pandemic. However, these were largely designed to address natural disasters and were not readily adaptable to the specific response demanded by a health pandemic. Earmarked budgets for such events often did not exist. Specific COVID-19 response plans were rapidly developed in the early months of the pandemic, often led by Ministries of Education together with various taskforces represented by multiple stakeholders.

In many countries in the sub-region, national and localized lockdowns restricted access to routine health and protection services for children. Nutritional deficiencies can have long-lasting effects on cognitive development and school closures as well as shrinking family income resulted in a reduction in the amount and quality of food children had access to.

The well-being of children, parents and teachers were adversely affected during the pandemic. Learners of all ages faced increased levels of stress due to isolation, uncertainty and fear of the future. Parents were stressed by economic challenges and home learning as they tried to balance the roles of parent and teacher. Parental stress and the restrictions caused by lockdown increased the physical and emotional abuse of children and the use of the internet may have resulted in increases in online bullying and exposure to materials that are not suitable for children. Harmful social norms became more prevalent across the region as household financial insecurity increased cases of child labour and early marriage.

Positive responses: Both Maldives and Sri Lanka demonstrated strong coordination between the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Health (MoH). In Sri Lanka, the historical collaboration between the two ministries, in which the MoH has played a significant role in public health measures in schools, meant that systems were already established and the roles of education and health players were defined at the outset of the pandemic. From this base, the response on health and welfare of school communities was swiftly built and evidence suggests that this led to a broader and more effective health response.

Lessons learned on health, well-being and protection

1. Greater recognition of, action in and monitoring of broader health and well-being impacts is needed as significant health, psychosocial and welfare needs of children including child protection tend to have been neglected.
2. Mental health issues need to be built into the school curriculum, so children are more aware of their emotions and are supported to cope with them.
3. A lack of monitoring means that the extent and the outcomes of the interventions during the pandemic are largely unknown.
4. There is a need to strengthen cross-sectoral aspects of the response and recovery at school level.
Challenge 5: Existing poverty levels

Across South Asia poverty and low GDP are at the root of many of the challenges. Over the past 20 years poverty across the region has been decreasing, although the rate of decline has slowed in recent years.

The World Bank highlights the effect that the COVID-19 crisis has had on poverty levels across the region, threatening to undo much of progress of the last 20 years in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. The decline in GDP across the countries and reduction in remittances is predicted to force more families into deeper poverty across the globe, with the majority of the new extreme poor in South Asia. A World Bank press release predicts that the number of people in urban areas in extreme poverty will increase as result of the crisis.

This decrease in household finances will increase the risk of children dropping out from education, as parents’ ability to send their children to school could be affected. Hidden schooling costs (ancillary costs, transport, uniforms, etc.) can become a barrier to schooling for the poorest and there are widening disparities in terms of learning opportunities. Many families will adopt negative coping mechanisms to manage, for example: removing children from school, or not sending them at all, subjecting girls to early marriage, putting children into labour to increase the family income.

The challenge in many of the countries was how to prioritize stretched resources to deal with: the health emergency; provide social and financial support to households to protect them from falling deeper into poverty; and prevent children from dropping out of school.

Positive responses: In Pakistan additional funding that specifically aims to support the poor and most vulnerable was made available including a $500 million budget support loan from the Asian Development Bank with part of it specifically for delivering social protection programmes to the poor and vulnerable. Existing social protection schemes such as the Benazir Bhutto Income Support Programme (BISP) were extended, essentially being taken over by the Ehsaas Emergency Support Scheme which was expanded to over 10 million families. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has provided education planning grants across the region and accelerated grants to Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Afghanistan, the $11 million grant is supporting activities from: distributing WASH and hygiene supplies to schools; recruiting and training volunteer teachers; supporting accelerated and remedial classes; and supporting public schools to ensure they are ready to reopen and keep students and teachers safe.

Lessons learned on existing poverty levels

1. Measures to prevent the virus from spreading had an unequal impact on different sections of society. The pandemic has had far-reaching effects across all income groups, but the poorest families have been worse hit. More support will be needed over the coming years to help families rebuild. Failure to do that may increase the risk of more children dropping out or not being able to make the most of their education.
2. Existing social protection systems were not sufficient or strong enough to reach everyone who needed support. Across South Asia, governments have increased efforts to support the poor. Emergency measures were taken to support many vulnerable families, who were already on the edge of extreme poverty. Economic and social protection measures such as direct cash transfers as well as the provision of food and essential items were able to alleviate some of the burden but not all.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building back better

The conceptualization and implementation of a new vision of education, given the opportunities and constraints revealed by the COVID-19 response, should be focused on ensuring an inclusive approach to learning and the development of 21st century skills in the future. New ways of working need to recognize alternative learning solutions to encompass the likelihood that significant numbers of children will not return to school. This will be a complex undertaking, so each country needs explicit short-, medium-, and long-term plans to build more meaningful and shock-resistant systems going forward.

Each government will need to significantly increase the level of funding for basic education as COVID-19 has created a new kind of humanitarian disaster which, unless addressed fully, could undo decades of investment and especially impact further on the education of vulnerable and marginalized children. The responses to the pandemic have revealed the importance of coherent responses which also engage key actors. Future responses need to involve a wider and deeper level of consultation than ever before, involving teachers, parents, community leaders, children themselves, as well as officials within the system.

This point in time provides a unique opportunity for change. To bring about real change, countries need to start where they are and build from their existing strengths, considering policies and planning through a gender lens, putting provision for the most marginalized at the forefront. The focus needs to shift to marginalized children (including young children, girls and children with disabilities) and to differentiating their needs at different ages and in different contexts. This requires a better understanding of what goes on in the classroom (virtual and face-to-face) and how and when children learn. Solutions developed through this inclusive lens will enable countries to meet the needs of all groups of children.

If systems are to become more resilient to potential new shocks, investment in human capital needs to begin earlier. Strengthening data collection systems to make more disaggregated and gender-responsive information available about marginalized children will enable appropriate teaching and learning materials and support systems to be developed.

Recommendations

As demonstrated through this report and the country case studies, all countries in the region have sought to respond effectively to the pandemic, and there are some examples of excellent initiatives that could be adapted and expanded to other contexts. It is recognized that budgets for investment are constrained, yet it is vital that children and young people are prioritized and so some of the recommendations are ambitious.

Feedback from countries at the South Asia webinar, on the interventions requiring the most assistance from Governments and other partners, included: equitable access to devices; school infrastructure equipment (buildings and equipment); and digital skills for students and teachers.
Recommendation 1: Reopen schools and ensure all children can learn safely as soon as possible

The most important and urgent recommendation is to reopen schools safely and to enable all children to restart learning with their teachers. This will include considering the latest research on the impact of school closures and working hand-in-hand with other sectors at all levels to ensure a safe and healthy response. Monitoring and decision-making systems need to be established across sectors and levels, to address safety compliance issues, and to follow up with children and marginalized groups that are not re-enrolling in school. In the longer term, resources need to be targeted at ensuring adequate WASH facilities are available in all schools, especially those in marginalized communities.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen the use of data to identify and reach the most marginalized children

To make targeted costed investments and prioritize strategies, real-time data needs to be collected through continuous comprehensive monitoring. Child-level monitoring data such as attendance monitoring will be crucial and should feed into Education Management Information System (EMIS), so that children who have dropped out or who are at risk of dropping out are identified and provided with necessary support to prevent this from happening. Similarly, mental health and protection referrals should be tracked to feed into cross-sector responses and longer-term planning activities. Much more needs to be done to identify and support children with disabilities from early childhood onwards. Countries need to build back better and develop and implement disability-inclusive education programmes through inclusive teacher pedagogy, accessible facilities, assistive devices and classroom assistance, as well as revised learning materials and assessment protocols that are adapted and adjusted to the needs of students with disabilities.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen teaching and teacher support to address existing low levels of learning and help narrow the learning divide

Governments will need to revisit their short- and long-term education sector plans to include distance learning strategies. The key to this planning will be to balance short-term investment in low-tech and no-tech distance learning to reach current learners with no access to the internet or connected devices, with long-term investments to connect schools to electricity and the internet and all learners with devices and online learning platforms. In the shorter term, teachers will need to be trained and supported in assessment strategies and in teaching at the right level, while also facilitating students to become autonomous learners and acquire the 21st century skills that they need to be able to live, learn and thrive. Building on lessons learned about marginalized children during the pandemic, teachers will need to be trained on gender-responsive and inclusive practices so that they are better able to meet the needs of all the children in the class.

Recommendation 4: Provide a package of support to ensure children’s health, nutrition and well-being

An important aspect of pandemic preparedness plans is to define and budget for the package of essential health services that need to be resumed, maintained and expanded, which address the health, welfare and nutrition needs of pre-school and school-aged children, beyond learning needs, to build back better and protect their ongoing development. For school children, this will be both the school health services and wider public health provision, including immunization, malaria control, oral health, vision screening, additional support for the disabled. Collaboration among governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in the health response to COVID-19 is required, especially for children with disabilities. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) systems and processes need to be strengthened, especially those based in schools.

Recommendation 5: Provide holistic support for children in early childhood development and pre-primary

Governments must prioritize holistic support for children in early childhood development and pre-primary, ensuing young children have safe access to face-to-face social contact that also meets the need of their caregivers. In the medium to long term, countries can look at the feasibility of introducing more community-based early years provision.

Recommendation 6: Expand implementation of pro-poor policies and consider introducing Universal Child Benefits to support the poorest and most vulnerable members of society

As much as possible, governments in the region must ensure that the poorest and most marginalized children do not disproportionately suffer long-term impacts from the pandemic. In the short term, they must prioritize providing social protection measures to the families most in need. This will require multi-sector collaboration between the
Governments will face difficult trade-offs and tough choices in most sectors: it is therefore imperative that MoEs present evidence-based arguments for investments in education, and leverage the existing and mounting evidence of the adverse consequences of not doing so. In the case of South Asia, the cost of inaction in education would be difficult to imagine: the financial loss to the economies can be estimated, but the impacts to societies of uncompensated loss of human capital is difficult to predict: a demographic bulge of unskilled youths entering the labour market without the education background or the skills for productive employment is not just an economic loss for the country, it is also a high risk to peace and social cohesion.

**Conclusion**

South Asian countries were making progress against SDG education targets before the pandemic, although there were still serious areas of concern around access and learning; and it was already unlikely that all countries would reach the SDG 4 targets by 2030. Despite this progress however, there were already an estimated, 31.8 million children out of school altogether, the majority of whom are of secondary age. The current rate of progress in getting out-of-school children into schools will not be enough to reach the SDG target for 2030 for primary or junior secondary school. Participation of young children in school is increasing but still an average of only 69 per cent of children unable to read an age-appropriate text by the age of ten. Learning throughout the region was in crisis pre-pandemic, with an average of 58 per cent of children unable to read an age-appropriate text by the age of ten.

This is despite national education priorities and plans having a strong quality pillar, outlining how the country should address low learning outcomes.

The additional effects of the pandemic will have long-term consequences on children and families. At a time when household finances decreased making food less available, health services such as school feeding which became more imperative were reduced due to school closures. Referral services and helplines saw an increase in calls across the region and levels of anxiety increased. Countries that were not on track to achieve them before the pandemic, will find themselves even further behind a year later.

There is a very serious risk that the learning loss as a consequence of school closures and lack of access to remote learning materials will undermine the cognitive capital of countries going forward. The extent to which this is the case much depends on the reach and quality of responses to mitigate learning loss. Remediation measures to prevent further learning loss will need
significant attention and greater financial investment in the education sector in the short term is needed, despite the risk that the overall budget for education will be reduced as economies shrink. Furthermore, funds have been diverted to other sectors such as health and support from other countries will be reduced because of pressures on their own budgets.

The overall response has been mixed in terms of reach and quality and there is little knowledge about levels of meaningful participation or learning. Marginalized children, the young and those with disabilities have been particularly disadvantaged during the pandemic despite the diverse range of learning provision and support. Despite this, different countries in the region responded to the crisis with many innovative approaches which can be shared, learned from and applied in other countries. Some of the lessons learned during the pandemic include:

- The strength of cross-sectoral collaboration between health and education at all levels enabled a comprehensive response and communication of messages to support safe school reopening.
- Where there were approaches which were designed and implemented by local actors, including NGOs, the needs of the most marginalized were better able to be met, although this did not ensure participation and learning.
- Critical gaps in real-time monitoring capacities have been identified and should be addressed as an immediate priority to track implementation of response and recovery plans.

This crisis has presented some positive opportunities for change. Building back better will require a range of actions, and policies and plans which are focused on the most marginalized: allocating sufficient funding for pre-primary education, seeking alternative learning solutions, recognizing the importance of formative assessment and curriculum revision which prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy, MHPSS, and encouraging the development of skills including critical thinking and independent learning.

The marginal shocks to the education budgets must be viewed in relation to the opportunity costs of neglecting these expenditures. In addition to strengthening the social contract between government and citizens by protecting access to education, which is a key social service, countries also risk foregoing potential demographic dividends if they fail to strengthen their education systems to catch up on the lost learning and provide a safe environment for children to return to school. By engaging with tools such as the Financial Shock Model described in Chapter 2, governments can develop evidence-based financial simulations that can provide the planning information needed to advocate for increased funding for education.

These dividends and a strong social contract will help to generate additional future tax revenues, which will offset (if not fully cover) the financing currently required to respond to COVID-19. Moreover, supporting quality education may generate potential expenditure savings by avoiding costly alternative welfare support programmes. Given these considerations, the countries should investigate all available revenue sources – even deficit financing – to ensure that the education sector has sufficient resources to respond to the shocks presented by COVID-19.
01

Introduction
1.1 Background

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic makes it unique, affecting the whole world with the twin shocks of a health emergency and an economic recession. This will lead to long-term costs on human capital accumulation, development prospects and welfare. The pandemic has affected all parts of the world and the responses to the situation have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society. The contexts within which the people of South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia are having to cope with the virus are vastly different, with a disparity in living conditions and varying degrees of access to and quality of essential services such as health and education. Across the continent there is vast inequality between the rich and poor and therefore different levels of resilience to the shocks that this disease has brought, putting the poor at long-term risk far beyond contracting the virus.

Some of the most vulnerable children felt the side-effects of COVID-19 from the moment nationwide lockdowns were put in place to control the spread of the disease. Initially, schools, markets, workshops, farms and factories closed, leaving children and families stranded. Throughout this situation, deep-rooted inequalities in societies are being exposed. A year on from the start of the crisis, the fear and uncertainty continues for most people, whereas for others in the region life has almost returned to normal.

This situation analysis has been undertaken as part of the broader analysis initiated by UNICEF and UNESCO to provide a snapshot of the education responses and effects of COVID-19 across Asia. It considers the direct effects of school closures and reopening and identifies the initial impact that this may have had on learners, their families as well as on the overall education system. It seeks understanding on the contextual factors that may have supported or hindered learning, with particular attention on the most disadvantaged groups who will be most affected by the pandemic, particularly highlighting girls and learners with disabilities. The aim of this is to identify interventions which have been able to successfully reach the most marginalized communities and how their different needs were addressed to increase accessibility and participation for all.

1.2 Methodology

Three sub-regional reports provide an overview of the situation and are drawn from key documents, including 14 detailed country case studies, which provide a more in-depth look at specific areas. The sub-regional reports were developed with support from the regional UNICEF and UNESCO offices, and were presented to governments and other stakeholders at two webinars. This report focuses on South Asia and includes feedback gathered from the webinar which was held in March 2021 with government and donor partners from across the sub-region to present the findings of this analysis and to validate these with countries’ more recent experiences.

1.3 Structure of the report

The sub-regional report is structured in six chapters. After the introduction, Chapter 2 outlines the situation prior to COVID-19, as well as the effects of COVID-19 on: access and participation, and learning levels; health, well-being and safe learning operations; and the financial implications of reaching the SDG 4 targets. Chapter 3 presents the overarching challenges, examples of positive responses and lessons learned. Chapter 4 looks to the future, considering what building back better could look like in the region. Chapter 5 provides specific recommendations for building back better and increasing the resilience of the education system to future shocks. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the report, with a summary against the three objectives of the study.
02

Background and Context
2.1 COVID-19 in South Asia

South Asia consists of a diverse set of countries, stretching from Afghanistan in the northwest of the region to Maldives in the Indian Ocean in the south. The region has a range of topographies including mountainous countries such as Nepal and Bhutan, situated in the Himalayas, the delta country of Bangladesh, and the islands of Sri Lanka and Maldives. India and Pakistan are huge, densely populated countries which stretch from the Himalayas in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south.

The first cases of COVID-19 struck in South Asia in February 2020. A year later the pandemic is still affecting lives in the region. Table 1 shows where the highest levels of infection have been throughout the region. Maldives has had proportionately the most infections per 100,000 of the population, followed by Nepal.

India is the second most impacted country in the world after the United States but with fewer recorded deaths, whereas other countries, particularly those with areas of less population density and natural geographical barriers, like Afghanistan and Bhutan, managed to keep the numbers of infections and deaths low. The significant second wave in India in April/May 2021 has had an impact on neighbouring countries such as Nepal, due to the extensive, open, cross-border movement between the two countries.

Figure 2 shows the case fatality rates due to COVID-19 in each of the South Asian countries, which have stayed fairly constant throughout the pandemic and mainly lower than the global average. Pakistan is just slightly higher than the global average, however, Afghanistan, along with other conflict states such as Yemen and Syria, has one of the highest case fatality rates in the world (ranked as the 11th highest rate globally).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>INFECTIONS PER 100,000</th>
<th>NO. OF INFECTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>8,931</td>
<td>47,421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1,866</td>
<td>25,496,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>1,661</td>
<td>472,354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>147,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>782,129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>882,928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>1,309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>64,122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Levels of preparedness: Overall, the South Asia sub-region is quite well prepared for sudden shocks which disrupt life, such as floods and earthquakes, as well as periods of political disruption and conflict in different forms, and these shocks can often result in school closures and interruption of learning. While countries in the region have comprehensive emergency plans in place to deal with these major disasters, because of the nature of the shocks they tended to focus on safety, medical and infrastructure responses. Mechanisms were in place to respond quickly to sudden disasters, but COVID-19 required a different type of response, focused on preventing the spread of infection, while providing alternative means of education.

As would be expected, the pandemic was seen first and foremost as a health emergency, with actions taken to keep lives safe. All countries imposed a lockdown on their populations which closed schools, businesses, industry, shops and affected all aspects of people’s lives, including access to health care. These measures, while protecting life, had a major impact on the economy and also on household finances as it prevented many people from earning an income, and while social protection systems were mobilized and reached some of the population, they were not enough to support all families, leaving many people vulnerable.

Who will be most affected?
The Lancet identifies vulnerable groups as those people who “are disproportionately exposed to risk,” and the most likely to be affected by the policy responses to the pandemic. It describes vulnerability as a dynamic state which people moved in and out of during the course of the pandemic. World Bank figures from 2014 put the number of people in poverty in South Asia at 15.2 per cent, against a baseline of $1.90 per day. This was a significant decrease from 48.7 per cent in 1990, and poverty levels have continued to decline throughout the region. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens this progress as people become more vulnerable to falling further or back into poverty.

Marginalized and vulnerable children include: those living in households in extreme poverty including those in urban slum areas; children from disadvantaged households such as remote or hard-to-reach areas or those who speak a minority language; children at risk of drop out and exploitation, girls at risk of early marriage and pregnancy, children on the move (migrants and refugees); children with physical disabilities and those with special learning needs; and very young children. These are the children who are most likely to be affected by the policy responses to the situation.
The main policy response to affect children was the closure of schools. Apart from Maldives, schools throughout South Asia were fully closed for longer than the global average.\textsuperscript{51}

### 2.2 How did the spread of the pandemic affect learning?

The infection rates peaked at different times in each country over the course of the year as shown in Figure 3, with Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal having spikes in infection rates at two periods during the year. At the start of the crisis, schools were initially fully closed for about four months across the region and as the pandemic spread, the length of closures varied across countries (Figure 4). Children in Bangladesh were out of school for the longest continuous period of time (by April 2021, schools had still not re-opened). In Bhutan and Maldives some children were learning at home for less than 100 days, however, staggered openings meant that others were out of school for a considerably longer period of time. In Pakistan and Sri Lanka, schools fully re-opened for approximately three months in the middle of the year; in Afghanistan they opened fully for a month. These reopenings were followed by more full closures and partial reopening. India and Nepal partially re-opened classes from September onwards, but by March 2021 had still not re-opened fully for all children.

Most countries in the region prioritized older children for return as they were facing high-stakes exams, which were important for the children’s future and the economy of the country. However, evidence suggests that the youngest children were those most in need of face-to-face interaction and should have been the first back in school. Children throughout the region have had their schooling disrupted for over a year, and been reliant on being able to access alternative provision for education, which, as shown below, did not reach every learner and was no substitute for face-to-face contact.

#### FIGURE 3 | PEAK INFECTION MONTHS\textsuperscript{52}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>June 2020</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>June 2021</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>April</th>
<th>May</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Maldives, India</td>
<td>Nepal, Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

51. The main policy response to affect children was the closure of schools. Apart from Maldives, schools throughout South Asia were fully closed for longer than the global average.

52. The infection rates peaked at different times in each country over the course of the year as shown in Figure 3, with Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal having spikes in infection rates at two periods during the year. At the start of the crisis, schools were initially fully closed for about four months across the region and as the pandemic spread, the length of closures varied across countries (Figure 4). Children in Bangladesh were out of school for the longest continuous period of time (by April 2021, schools had still not re-opened). In Bhutan and Maldives some children were learning at home for less than 100 days, however, staggered openings meant that others were out of school for a considerably longer period of time. In Pakistan and Sri Lanka, schools fully re-opened for approximately three months in the middle of the year; in Afghanistan they opened fully for a month. These reopenings were followed by more full closures and partial reopening. India and Nepal partially re-opened classes from September onwards, but by March 2021 had still not re-opened fully for all children.

Most countries in the region prioritized older children for return as they were facing high-stakes exams, which were important for the children’s future and the economy of the country. However, evidence suggests that the youngest children were those most in need of face-to-face interaction and should have been the first back in school. Children throughout the region have had their schooling disrupted for over a year, and been reliant on being able to access alternative provision for education, which, as shown below, did not reach every learner and was no substitute for face-to-face contact.
“Currently, the evidence to support national closure of schools to combat COVID-19 is very weak and data from influenza outbreaks suggest that school closures could have relatively small effects on a virus with COVID-19’s high transmissibility and apparent low clinical effect on school children. At the same time, these data also show that school closures can have profound economic and social consequences.”

Resource constraints, particularly in low-income countries, make it increasingly important that decisions are based on evidence of effectiveness of the measure proposed as well as the level of risk. Much of the evidence regarding the effectiveness of school closures and social distancing measures has been based on influenza transmission which tends to be driven by children.55

COVID-19 transmission is known to differ, and the suggestion in the same Lancet article is that children are less likely to spread the virus, but this is not yet well understood. Studies54 suggest that alternative social distancing interventions are more effective in preventing deaths than school closures alone and that further research is needed to improve understanding of decision makers on the effectiveness of the school measures being widely implemented. Table 2 illustrates the varying COVID-19 transmission types found in the eight countries of South Asia.

Decisions about school openings were taken mainly based on the health situation. These variations in transmission are important considerations in response planning and in the decisions taken locally around safe operations, particularly in terms of time spent in and away from school, i.e., phased return to school, staggered attendance, etc. Where there was widespread community transmission or the number of cases was rising, effective safe operating measures in schools were even more important while public health measures in the community were essential to protect schools from amplifying transmission.56 Significant outbreaks in schools were not widely recorded but there are examples of where these have been associated with overcrowded classrooms and weak preventive measures.58

In a region where learning is already in crisis (as described below), consideration needs to be given to other less disruptive interventions for schools especially if measures are imposed for lengthy periods of time, particularly as
such restrictive measures have the potential to result in major detrimental effects on the health and well-being of children and adolescents particularly the most vulnerable.59

2.3 Access and participation and learning

What was the situation before COVID-19?

Were children in school and participating?

SDG Target 4.1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

Figure 5 presents the sub-regional gross enrolment ratios in 2019. Although India dominates the regional average, the outcomes for India are mostly in line with regional trends.

The weighted regional average gross enrolment ratios are 80.2 per cent for pre-primary school, 100 per cent for primary school, 89.3 per cent for lower secondary school, and 64 per cent for upper secondary school. This indicates that a large proportion of children in the sub-region attend basic education institutions (primary and lower secondary school). The data reveals that enrolment outcomes were lowest at the pre-primary and upper secondary school levels. The worst enrolment outcomes for pre-primary school were in Afghanistan (including Madrassas) and Bhutan with respective gross enrolment ratios of 47.9 per cent and 49.3 per cent, less than half of children in that cohort. Enrolment in upper secondary school was typically poor across all countries with the exception of Sri Lanka, which had a 97.7 per cent gross enrolment ratio.

Despite this varied picture, increase in enrolment, and improvement in gender ratios in the past 20 years, particularly at primary level, have been key successes for the region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRANSMISSION LEVELS</th>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sporadic</td>
<td>Bhutan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clusters of cases</td>
<td>Afghanistan, Maldives, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community transmission</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source of COVID-19 cases: WHO (8 December 2020)
“Children with disabilities are among the most excluded from education. While availability of accurate data remains a challenge, various estimates indicate children with disabilities could easily make up a third of out-of-school children globally. Those who manage to enrol in school continue to face exclusion and marginalisation. This is due to lack of appropriate facilities and learning materials, lack of trained teachers to meet special educational needs, inflexibility of the school system, stigma and a host of other factors.”

Case study findings: Afghanistan

The reasons why children are out of school were examined in a recent assessment. These included household poverty, gender, parental level of education and disability among others factors. Girls are less likely to attend schools than boys, particularly at secondary level. The assessment found that girls’ ability to attend and participate in schooling is limited by factors such as attitudes towards girls’ education, child marriage, violence and harassment, insecurity, distance to school as well as a lack of female teachers. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) survey showed primary attendance to be 64 per cent, with 54 per cent of girls completing primary education and 38 per cent of girls completing secondary education.

Although numbers of children out of school are decreasing across the region, there are still a large percentage of children excluded from opportunities for learning, many of these include young children, children with disabilities and those from marginalized groups.

Pre-primary was a pre-COVID-19 focus for most countries as they worked towards improving foundational education through the introduction of pre-primary classes. Financing for pre-primary education, however, is low in lower-middle-income countries, which affects the quality and amount of provision for young children. Pre-primary enrolment varied across the region with over 80 per cent gross enrolment in Maldives, Nepal, and Pakistan and below 50 per cent in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan (2018-2020).

Inclusive education for children with disabilities is also high on the agenda for the countries in the region but, while there are pockets of good practice, there is still a long way to go before all children with disabilities are in schools with their learning needs adequately met.

While the figures above show the achievements that countries have made in bringing children, especially girls, into school over the past 20 years, there is more to be done across the region to achieve the SDG 4 target for 2030. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent policy responses threaten this progress as children have been out of school for long periods of time, increasing the risk of dropout from all levels of education.
Case study findings: Bhutan and Nepal

In Bhutan, education quality and learning outcome achievement are not high, when measured against international standards.\(^70\)

There are still concerns for Nepal that quality and learning achievement are falling behind the SDG targets. It was confirmed by the 2017 round of National Assessment of Student Achievements (NASA) for Grade 8, that despite all efforts and progress in access and retention indicators, average learning scores in two core subjects (math and science) had actually decreased over the previous five years.\(^71\)
“An estimated 5.5 million students are likely to drop out altogether due to COVID-19-related income losses, which is over half of all the estimated dropouts globally. Many probably left school to help families with lost income.”

What were the effects of COVID-19?

Effects of COVID-19 on future participation once schools reopen

One of the effects of these long school closures is the likely increase in the number of learners dropping out of school.

- In South Asia, school closures due to COVID-19 kept 391 million students out of school, including 22 million children, who missed out on their pre-school year.
- 24 million learners globally will be at risk of not returning to education institutions, and 20 million more secondary school-age girls could be out of school after the crisis.

The estimates above were made early on in the crisis when the extent of school closures was still not known. With education still being disrupted throughout the South Asia region, there is no accurate data as to the actual numbers of learners who have dropped out, but it is clear from more recent understanding of the depth of the situation, that there will be a significant number of children who never return to school.

The reasons for this dropout are varied and complex. They include children losing the habit of going to school and the fact that many girls are more likely to be forced into an early marriage. Increased family pressures could mean that families prioritize survival, with children, especially boys, taking on income-generating activities.
The other negative aspect of school closures is the effect on young children, who, as mentioned above, will have missed out on a critical preparation year for primary schooling. This lack of preparedness can result in poorer outcomes in the future, leading to a greater risk of dropout, and an increase in repetition rates, as children are less prepared to learn.

**Lost opportunities for learning**

All countries in the region, after closing schools, quickly developed plans and took action to enable children to continue learning and reach vast numbers of learners. Despite this quick response, experience has shown that learning will have been lost for many children across the region, exacerbating the learning crisis and increasing learning poverty.

Evidence from a study after the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, showed that four years after schools had been closed for 3 months, children were 1.5 years behind in learning outcomes.77

As is shown in Figure 4, the amount of time that schools were closed varies greatly across the region, with schools in most countries fully or partially closed for almost a year. The reasons for the variation depended on a number of factors as described in the UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank ‘What Have We Learnt? : Overview of Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education on National Responses to COVID-19’. “The duration of school closure varied by whether the academic year had been completed, whether countries deemed remote learning to be effective, and by income group.” 78

As mentioned earlier, many children are living in circumstances where household income has been reduced and there are pressures on them to support their family through increased household chores and outside work. These learners will have found little time to study, thus decreasing learning hours further.

Those particularly affected by the crisis and impacted by a technological response will be girls and those marginalized groups, with little access to technology. “There is also a significant gender digital divide, with girls far less likely to own or have access to digital devices and fewer opportunities to gain digital literacy skills.” 79

In Nepal, the worsened economic hardships as a result of COVID-19 are likely to be disproportionately severe for children from marginalized groups, and these groups also experience challenges with participating successfully in distance learning through radio, TV and the internet, and the difficult conditions to learn using self-learning materials.80

A 2020 UNICEF report found that the exclusion of children with disabilities from learning has also been exacerbated, as learning has shifted to remote and online delivery.81

In South Asia, the report found that in 63 per cent of countries, governments did not adapt their measures to make learning accessible for children with disabilities,

### Case study findings: Maldives

Students risk becoming demotivated during school closures and dropping out, with a rise in out-of-school children (already noted as an issue in the Education Sector Analysis (ESA) by MoE (2019). Disengagement from school has social effects, including association with a rise in criminality and exposure to abuse.82

### Case study findings: Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

In Bangladesh, a BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BGIDs) survey of 5,000 students from urban slums and rural areas across Bangladesh in June 2020 showed that it was not just days that were lost through school closure.83 Despite interventions to keep children learning, the actual learning hours, when children were out of school was reduced from approximately 10 hours per day to 2 hours, and this is likely to be similar in many countries.84

In Sri Lanka, the global pandemic has caused large-scale disruption to the continuation of structured in-school education for approximately 4.2 million students and 235,000 teachers.85 Globally, the closing of schools for just one day causes a loss of about 25 million learning hours and 1.4 million teaching hours.86
compared to 38 per cent of countries whose governments did. The same UNICEF report also comments that more research and data is needed to show how the pandemic has affected children with disabilities, but that they are “likely to remain invisible in data collection efforts, unless dedicated measures are put in place to make such efforts disability-inclusive”.67

Over a long period of time, almost a year’s absence from school, a lack of face-to-face contact, unequal access to alternatives, and for young children and children with disabilities inappropriate provision, will have significant effects on the levels of performance. In a context where many children were already learning below the expected grade level, the effects of the crisis will make it even more challenging for countries to reach the 2030 SDG 4 targets for learning. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

2.4 Health, well-being and protection and safe operations

What was the situation before COVID-19?

A UNICEF report on the situation of children in South Asia highlighted some of the health problems which affect the lives of children and their participation in education in different ways.88

In addition, malnutrition is prevalent across South Asia and impacts negatively on children’s access and performance in education. Of the three countries that are home to almost half (47.2 per cent) of all stunted children, two are in Asia: India (46.6 million) and Pakistan (10.7 million).89 The lack of food security faced by vulnerable families means they may eat as little as one meal a day and buy food of lower nutritional value. More than half of the world’s children impacted by wasting (25 million)90 live in South Asia while around 300 million schoolchildren in low- and middle-income countries have anaemia, causing them to lose some six IQ points per child.91 Around 73 million schoolchildren in low-income countries go to school hungry.92 These conditions translate into the equivalent of between 200 million and 500 million school days lost to ill health each year.51

What were the effects of COVID-19?

A strong health response was vital to education, not only to protect children and their families against the risk of COVID-19 infection but to ensure that the myriad of other interlinked health, mental health, nutrition, social and WASH services required to support child and adolescent well-being remain accessible to those most in need.

In 2020, essential services were severely reduced or ceased as a result of the pandemic. Common service disruptions (reported from Southeast Asia but likely to be similar across the Asia regions) affecting children and adolescents include: routine immunization, diagnosis and treatment of non-communicable disease (NCD); provision of sexual and reproductive health services; treatment for mental health disorders and sick child services.94 Community-based child protection programmes, and case management for children requiring supplementary personalized care, including those living with disabilities, and abuse victims were also partially or completely suspended.95 Other lost school services include school meals, speech therapy, peer support groups as well as crucial deworming programmes which in many countries of South Asia have been highly valuable in preventing common parasitic worm infections.96
Potential disruption of health systems along with decreased access to food (from disrupted school feeding programmes as well as reductions in family income) could lead to as much as a 44 per cent increase in monthly deaths of children under-5 across 188 low- and middle-income countries. Malnutrition is not only the underlying cause of 45 per cent of preventable deaths of children under five, but is associated with weakened immune systems and impacts future educational and economic attainment. Micronutrients such as iodine, vitamin A, and iron are vital to the health and development of children, with a number of such deficiencies known to potentially hinder children’s cognitive development. More simply, hunger effects concentration. A BRAC Rapid Assessment study in Bangladesh found that food insecurity was a common reason given for not studying by madrassa and urban students.

Research has demonstrated that those with disabilities and their families are more likely to be subjected to hunger and poverty. They are among children prone to underlying health conditions and not only face increased risk of serious complications from COVID-19, but are likely to face obstacles in accessing the support and response measures they need.

During school closures, children face social isolation and increased levels of stress. This is also a concern for children with disabilities, and those with existing mental health issues. Those with working parents or caregivers may be forced to stay home alone, which puts them at risk of a wide range of protection issues. An increased level of domestic violence against women and children and children with disabilities, (e.g., in the form of child labour, trafficking for sexual exploitation), damages their physical, emotional and mental well-being while prolonged stress has been shown to impair students’ learning and threaten their future development.

For girls in the region, there is an increased likelihood of child marriage when children are out of school, increasing adolescent pregnancies at a time when maternity care is reduced, and health resources are repurposed to COVID-19. This is likely to result in a rise in communicable disease-related adolescent mortality. For girls in the region, there is an increased likelihood of child marriage when children are out of school, increasing adolescent pregnancies at a time when maternity care is reduced, and health resources are repurposed to COVID-19. This is likely to result in a rise in communicable disease-related adolescent mortality.

“It is expected that as a result of school drop-out among girls in South Asia due to COVID-19, that an additional 405,640 adolescent pregnancies will occur in the region. This could lead to an additional 655 maternal and 9,986 neonatal deaths, 154,985 low birthweight births, and 29,000 children who are likely to be stunted by the age of 2 years.”

2.5 Safe operations and reopening of schools

Deprivations in adequate sanitation and a safe source of drinking water (both at home and in some school settings) leave children at risk of exposure to potentially fatal disease courses. They represent two key multi-dimensional poverty indicators and are predisposing factors for COVID-19. Hand hygiene (washing with soap and water) is one of the most effective actions to reduce the spread of pathogens and prevent infections. Table 3 sets out the definitions used by WHO and UNICEF to report on WASH facility availability in schools.

“Quarantine constrains and overall burden faced by families might also place children with disabilities at increased risk for discrimination and of being exposed to violent discipline methods in the household.”

According to the UN, in April 2020: 368.5 million children globally across 143 countries who normally rely on school meals for a reliable source of daily nutrition must now look to other food sources.
Figure 6 gives an overview of WASH provision in schools in South Asia. While a UNICEF report recognizes that, “the past decade also saw greater government commitments and increased investments for WASH in schools,” it is concerning that a recent survey, carried out by the World Bank and UN agencies in October 2020 of 113 countries, has suggested that up to 50 per cent of low-income countries do not have enough resources to offer adequate protection to all pupils and staff. Although there is a lack of comprehensive data on the situation in the region, Figure 6 provides some evidence of the WASH situation pre-COVID-19. It shows that in Afghanistan, 33 per cent of public schools were found to have no WASH facilities and in Bangladesh, where schools have been closed for the longest period of time, most schools have access to drinking water, but less than half have a basic hygiene service. In India 41 per cent of schools have no hygiene services in schools and 24 per cent no sanitation. By contrast, all schools in Sri Lanka have single sex, useable toilets.

**TABLE 3 | DEFINITIONS OF WASH IN SCHOOLS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRINKING WATER</th>
<th>SANITATION</th>
<th>HYGIENE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Improved facilities that are single sex and useable are in schools</td>
<td>Handwashing facilities that have water and soap available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Improved facilities (flush/pour flush toilets, pit latrine with slab, composting toilet) but not single sex or not useable at time of survey</td>
<td>Handwashing facilities with water but no soap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Service</td>
<td>No toilets of unimproved facilities (pit latrines, without a slab or platform, bucket latrines)</td>
<td>No handwashing facilities at the schools or handwashing facilities with no water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 6 | WASH SITUATION ACROSS SOUTH ASIA**

Only two of the eight countries in South Asia (Bangladesh and India) have comprehensive data on the WASH situation in schools.

**WHO Checklist for Safe Opening**

- Epidemiological surveillance
- Messaging and isolation procedures
- Hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette
- Physical distancing and use of masks in schools
- Environmental cleaning and ventilation
Across the region, all governments worked with UNICEF to develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) for schools, based on WHO’s checklist for safe opening (summarized in the box above). The checklist is designed to support multi-level, cross-sector and cross-agency coordination of the COVID-19 response and reduce inequalities.

At the national level, the education and health sectors developed guidelines and monitoring frameworks and provided finance. Sub-national and school-level essential actions are also included in the checklist. Local authorities, school leaders, teachers’ unions, community leaders, school staff, teachers, parents and caregivers were expected to use these guidelines to make decisions over when and how to open schools and how to keep schools open safely, especially for the most vulnerable children.

This lack of adequate WASH facilities presents a major barrier to schools reopening, as without basic hygiene facilities schools, children and teachers will be unable to follow these guidelines for safe school reopening, particularly the critical ones around handwashing and sanitation.

This is considered further in Chapter 3, and the recommendations in Chapter 5 suggest priorities for short-term development.

2.6 Financial analysis

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant fiscal policy challenges, which are set to continue until lasting solutions to the pandemic are found.

The economic growth shocks in 2020 due to COVID-19 are presented for the sub-region in Figure 7. The impact is striking, with an average -4.3 per cent real change in GDP. While Bangladesh (3.8 per cent), Bhutan (0.6 per cent), and Nepal (0 per cent) managed to avoid a contraction in GDP, their GDP growth still slowed to significantly lower rates than before the pandemic. The other countries in the sub-region all experienced contractions in GDP, with India (-10.3 per cent) and Maldives (-18.6 per cent) the worst affected.

Among the implications of these macroeconomic shocks are downward pressure on government revenues, which reduce fiscal space and force governments to make difficult prioritization decisions. Governments’ top funding priorities include the healthcare emergency and strengthening social protection to support the increased numbers of unemployed and underemployed workers. Within this context of deteriorated fiscal balances at the same time as increased expenditure demands, the IMF stresses the risk that other critical public expenditures, notably on education, are crowded out. In fact, UNICEF reported that more than a third of low- and lower-middle-income countries have either already experienced or anticipate decreases to their education budget for the current or next fiscal year. This risk is complicated by the negative effect of rising unemployment and underemployment on household income, which is a key supplementary source of education expenditure – especially in countries with high numbers of low-fee private schools, like India. It is thus critical that these prioritization decisions are carefully managed to avoid detrimental effects on education outcomes that undermine progress towards SDG 4.
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This section of the report therefore estimates the impact of COVID-19 on South Asian countries’ education budgets. The objective is to demonstrate how school closures as well as altered teaching environments and modes are expected to change the resources required by education sectors. The impacts are presented relative to the pre-COVID-19 funding needs to attain SDG 4 by 2030. The modelling results indicate how much governments should additionally budget for education to respond to the challenges presented by COVID-19, which are reviewed in detail in Chapter 3. Stakeholders can apply the findings to reformulate education budgets to maintain progress towards achieving SDG 4 by 2030.

Pre-COVID-19 situation

The relative size of countries’ education sectors prior to COVID-19 helps explain the priority governments’ assign to the sector as well as the available resources to address the shocks caused by COVID-19. Countries with relatively low education budgets are generally at higher risk of falling education outcomes, as those systems likely suffer the most from under-investment and reprioritization. On the other hand, countries with relatively higher education budgets likely have stronger, more resilient systems and a sufficient funding base to allow governments to better respond to the impacts of COVID-19 through funding reallocation or budget reprioritization. Figure 8 presents the countries’ government education budgets relative to the guideline in the Education 2030 Framework that governments commit at least 4-6 per cent of GDP to education. Only Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bhutan allocated more than the minimum target of 4 per cent of GDP to education. The remaining countries in the sub-region all had low and declining education budgets prior to the negative shocks caused by COVID-19, especially Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. The required responses to the COVID-19 shocks represent a large proportional increase in financing for countries with low education budget baselines. Moreover, budget reprioritization away from the education sector would further undermine education outcomes in these countries with relatively low education budget baselines.

The impact of COVID-19 on a country’s education budget is linked to the level of education provision pre-COVID-19. The relative strength of an education system, measured in terms of enrolment characteristics and the stock of human and physical capital, helps determine the degree to which COVID-19 disrupted education services and necessitates structural changes to the system. For example, education systems with higher levels of human capital in the form of teaching staff are able to more readily (in terms of time and cost) implement social distancing measures.

Gross school enrolment ratios reflect the number of students affected by the disruptions caused by COVID-19 on the education sector. The relationship between enrolment and the budget impact of COVID-19 is therefore positive (i.e., the better the pre-COVID-19 situation in terms of higher enrolment ratios, the larger the budget impact caused by COVID-19 as more students are affected).

The characteristics of the private education sector contribute to the impact of COVID-19 on the public education system. Previously, private sector education provision has helped to ease the resource burden on the public education system. While this remains true, many countries have seen a rapid reduction in private education provision as a

![Figure 8: Education Budgets Relative to UNESCO Guideline, 2014-2019](source: UNESCO, 2021)
result of the shocks caused by COVID-19, especially among low-fee private schools. In these cases, the private education sector poses a contingent public liability as privately enrolled students may return to the public school system. Figure 9 presents the sub-regional enrolment in private schools in 2019. There are large deviations across countries, but overall the private sector fulfils a significant role in education provision in South Asia.

The learner-teacher ratio (LTR) has a significant bearing on the ability of countries to adhere to social distancing rules in classrooms, as well as the cost to achieve social distancing guidelines. Lower LTR mean that countries require relatively fewer, if any, additional teachers to achieve social distancing guidelines. There is a thus a positive relationship between the LTR and the budget impact of COVID-19. In addition to the cost associated with the additional teachers, countries with high LTR may find it logistically difficult, at least over the short- to medium-term, to achieve the prescribed LTR. Figure 10 presents the sub-regional LTR outcomes in 2019. At the pre-primary level, all countries in the sub-region had an LTR below 20:1. However, that positive outcome is linked with the low enrolment ratios. This situation is reversed for the remainder of the education levels. At the primary school level, the lowest LTR was 23.5:1 in Nepal, with the highest LTR 48.8:1 in Afghanistan. Slightly better but also poor outcomes are evident at the lower and upper secondary school levels, with the exception of Bhutan.

Source: UNESCO, 2021

![Figure 9: Private Sector School Enrolment for South Asian Countries, 2019](image-url)

![Figure 10: Learner-Teacher Ratios for South Asian Countries, 2019](image-url)
Estimated financial impact of COVID-19 on the education sector

To estimate the marginal impact of COVID-19 on education sector budgets through to 2030, when SDG 4 is hoped to be achieved, an interactive Excel modelling tool called the ‘COVID-19 Shock Model’ was developed as part of this situation analysis. In contrast to the World Bank’s 2021 micro-model, this is a macrosimulation model – similar to that applied in the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report – designed to estimate scenarios for education budgets.\textsuperscript{129} The budget baselines for the model are set according to the pre-COVID-19 education budgets to achieve the SDG 4 targets by 2030, as generated by the UNESCO Education Costing Model 2020 for Asia and the Pacific Region.\textsuperscript{129}

There is still a high degree of uncertainty about the pandemic. First, the outbreaks and resultant disruptions caused by COVID-19 are unpredictable. Second, the effectiveness and rollout (specifically to developing countries) of vaccines is still to be determined. Third, there are ongoing data collection and validation exercises that continuously improve our understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on the education sector. As such, the model is designed so that the financing scenarios are flexible. Users can interact with each variable, specifying the parameters based on: updated/verified data; an assumed baseline with stress tests; or a likely range. Given this functionality, although the parameters for the variables were fixed for this study, users can reapply the tool to effect any required changes. The financial scenarios presented below are therefore indicative of the potential magnitude of the impact of COVID-19 on education budgets.

The modelling exercise generates 3 potential scenarios to account for uncertainty: baseline; optimistic; and pessimistic. The baseline scenario should be viewed as the most likely and therefore the expected outcome, with the optimistic and pessimistic scenarios providing a range for the potential outcomes. The optimistic scenario assumes that COVID-19 has a less severe impact on the education sector. The pessimistic scenario assumes that COVID-19 has a severe impact on the education sector. While most countries in the region are preparing to include a blended approach to the delivery of education, making more effective use of technology going forward, technology costs haven’t been factored into the model due to uncertainty around how countries will take this forward and the range of inputs needed to achieve this.

The model obviously has its limitations. First, in order to remain both user-friendly and transparent the model relies on a limited number of variables. Although care was taken to select a comprehensive set of key variables, there may be some financial implications of COVID-19 that have been omitted. In this event, users should regard the results as a base for the financial impacts of COVID-19 from which to add the impact of missing variables. This point likely explains many of the estimation differences between this and other models. Second, the model is intended to approximately quantify the long-term budget needs to maintain progress towards SDG 4 by 2030 and therein guide investment cases. Hence, the model does not lend itself to in-year budget/programme planning. Third, the model’s focus is limited to pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education. This resulted in omissions to the SDG 4 targets related to tertiary education, skills for work, adult literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship, and scholarships. The methodology is expanded on in Annex A.

Based on the model specifications detailed in Annex A, we estimate the marginal impacts that COVID-19 will have on countries’ education budgets. It is important to highlight that the values presented in this section do not represent the total education budgets, but rather the additional budgets that countries likely require to respond to COVID-19 and still be in a position to achieve the noted SDG 4 targets by 2030.

**Total budget impact**

The estimated value of the additional budgets that countries require to respond to COVID-19 are shown in Table 4. This indicates the cumulative quantum of the COVID-19 shock, as it stood at the end of February 2021. The large variations across countries are representative of the relative size of the countries in the sub-region, as well as the particular impacts of COVID-19 on their education system. As noted in Chapter 2, the budget shocks are a function of the severity of the school closures and the health of education systems pre-COVID-19. Weaker education systems, for example those with higher learner-teacher ratios, require more resources to respond to COVID-19 in line with parameters set for the model. The value of the budget shocks range from $121 million in Maldives to $164 billion in India in the baseline scenario. The shocks are still large but less severe in the optimistic scenario, ranging from $101 million in Bhutan to $133 billion in India. The costs in the optimistic scenario increase in some countries relative to the baseline, for example Maldives, as it is assumed that countries complete a higher proportion of their WASH investment programmes during the pandemic period.
TABLE 4 | ESTIMATED MARGINAL BUDGET INCREASE TO RESPOND TO COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>BASELINE SCENARIO</th>
<th>OPTIMISTIC SCENARIO</th>
<th>PESSIMISTIC SCENARIO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>$3,058</td>
<td>$2,132</td>
<td>$5,566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>$58,280</td>
<td>$45,383</td>
<td>$94,944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>$134</td>
<td>$101</td>
<td>$240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>$164,282</td>
<td>$133,428</td>
<td>$275,223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>$121</td>
<td>$131</td>
<td>$188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>$1,812</td>
<td>$1,279</td>
<td>$3,483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>$31,641</td>
<td>$23,988</td>
<td>$54,659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>$2,340</td>
<td>$1,974</td>
<td>$4,027</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


FIGURE 11 | ESTIMATED IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE CUMULATIVE EDUCATION BUDGETS FROM 2020 TO 2030

For countries with a large WASH investment programme, the costs associated with more rapid investment offsets the savings in other areas. The budget shocks severely increase in the pessimistic scenario relative to the baseline scenario, with a range of $188 million in Maldives to $275 billion in India. These variations between the scenarios signal the downside risks associated with the pandemic.

Relative budget impact

The budget shocks presented in Table 4 are contextualized in Figure 11 as a proportion of countries’ cumulative education budgets from 2020-2030. This indicates the relative budget impact of COVID-19 under each scenario. For the baseline scenario, the impacts of COVID-19 have extended countries 2020-2030 education budgets by 4.6 per cent in Bhutan to 44 per cent in Bangladesh. This severe outcome in Bangladesh is due to the 169 days of full school closures, more than any other country in the sub-region, in combination with a very weak public school system prior to COVID-19 – for example, Bangladesh had the highest rates of private school enrolment for lower and upper secondary school and high learner-teacher ratios.

The budget shocks are still proportionally large in the optimistic scenario, ranging from 3.4 per cent of the 2020-2030 budget in Bhutan to 34.3 per cent of the 2020-2030 budget in Bangladesh. The results from the optimistic scenario indicate that even under an optimistic scenario many countries will still face large proportional budget shocks over their previously planned budgets to achieve SDG 4 by 2030. The impacts increase dramatically in the event that the pessimistic scenario is closest to the eventual outcome, with Afghanistan (26.7 per cent), Bangladesh (71.7 per cent), India (13.3 per cent), Nepal (23 per cent), and Pakistan (8.9 per cent) facing the largest potential impacts.
Sources of the budget shocks

The sources of the budget shocks are explained in Figures 12 to 15 for the baseline scenario. Figure 12 disaggregates the total marginal budget impact of COVID-19 according to the level of education. Pre-primary school is consistently the smallest component of the budget shock, due in large to the fact that this level only comprises one-year of teaching. However, despite accounting for a small proportion of school years (typically one out of 12-13 years) the budget impacts at the pre-primary level are significant, especially in Bhutan (10.3 per cent) and Maldives (10.4 per cent). Except for Bangladesh, the largest component of the budget shock across the sub-region is primary school, reaching 58.3 per cent of the total budget shock in Afghanistan. This is due to a combination of primary school forming most of the total school years for all countries and generally high learner-teacher ratios. The proportion of the budget shocks attributable to lower secondary school range from 12.8 per cent in India to 27.1 per cent in Maldives. The proportion of the budget shocks attributable to upper secondary school range from 14.4 per cent in Afghanistan to 52.7 per cent in Bangladesh and 41.2 per cent in India. The explanation for the different distribution of the budget shocks in Bangladesh and India, wherein the largest shocks are for upper secondary school, is due to the relatively high degree of private provision through low-fee private schools which poses a contingent liability to the public school system as COVID-19 causes students to shift back to public schools and the high learner-teacher ratios, which push up the cost to achieve social distancing guidelines.

Figure 13 disaggregates the total budget impacts according to the economic classification of the expenditure items. The recurrent expenditures include remediation costs, the cost to incorporate students shifting from private to public schools, the cost to re-enrol students who have dropped out of school, and the cost of teachers to implement social distancing measures. The goods and services expenditure include teacher training costs, hygiene and cleaning products and services, teacher support systems, and nutrition programmes. The capital expenditures include WASH infrastructure. This information helps with budgeting and indicates potential financing sources for the budget impacts. For example, recurrent expenditures should ideally be funded through a sustainable, long-term mechanism such as tax revenues while capital expenditures are also appropriate for deficit financing. Recurrent expenditures comprise the bulk of the budget shocks, ranging from 60.1 per cent in Maldives to 84.8 per cent in Bangladesh. That outcome is in line with duration of the school closures, which are shortest in Maldives at 71 days of full closures and highest in Bangladesh at 169 days of full closures. Capital expenditures are generally the next largest expenditure component, with goods and services comprising a minor share of the budget shock. This information signals that the COVID-19 impacts are human-resource intensive, with some countries also requiring significant investment in WASH infrastructure.

Figure 14 disaggregates the total budget impacts according to activity. This information identifies the specific activities that drive the magnitude of the budget impacts in each country, and thereby also helps to explain differences in relative size of the budget shocks across countries in the sub-region. The most significant activities in descending order of impact are social distancing, remediation, accommodating students shifting back from private schools, and investment in WASH infrastructure. These four activities largely drive the budget impacts of COVID-19. Bangladesh, which has the largest overall budget shock, also has a notably higher remediation cost relative to the other countries. For all countries the costs associated with re-enrolling students who have dropped out, hygiene standards, and nutrition programmes are minor components of the overall budget impact.
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Source: Costing Model (COVID-19 Shock Model).

Figure 15 disaggregates the total budget impacts according to whether the expenditures are an extension of currently provided services or new services. The previously provided services cover remediation costs, the transferred costs for students shifting from private to public schools, and the cost to re-enrol students that dropped out as a result of COVID-19. The new services cover the social distancing measures, all goods and services related to COVID-19 protocols such as personal protective equipment (PPE) and hygiene products, teacher support programmes, and the additional maintenance costs associated with the expedited WASH investments. This distinction between previous and new services is important as it identifies which costs are potentially discretionary, being the new services. Countries have potentially more agency over whether to approve the budget increases associated with new services, while the extension of previous services is in many ways a contingent liability. In general, the budget shocks are approximately evenly split between previous and new services. The proportion of the budget shocks attributable to previous services ranges from 22.6 per cent in Afghanistan to 58.4 per cent in Bangladesh. The high proportion of new services in Afghanistan is largely due to the high number of teachers that are required to achieve social distancing guidelines, as per Figure 15.

Affordability of COVID-19 related expenditure

In line with the modelling results presented in Chapter 2, UNICEF highlights that 95 per cent of the 149 surveyed countries reported that additional financial resources were required to ensure an adequate response to COVID-19 for education. UNICEF notes that when these financing needs were fully or partially met, this was commonly funded in low- and lower-middle-income countries through a combination of additional domestic financing and external donors, and in high-income countries through budget reallocations. Given the need to accommodate these financial pressures on the education sector within the context of severe resource constraints, as per the weak economic growth outcomes shown in Figure 7, it is important to review the fiscal space available to countries. To do so we apply the fiscal space framework developed by the IMF, which uses the following four pillars to explore the potential to finance the budget impacts of COVID-19 on the education sector: domestic revenues mobilization; deficit financing; official development assistance; and reprioritization and efficiency of expenditures. Fiscal space studies generally develop a macro-model for forecasting fiscal space in a country under different scenarios, developing scenarios for correcting the fiscal under-performance related to each of the above pillars. The reliability of such forecasting models depends heavily on the rigour of the exercise, the quality of the macroeconomic and fiscal data, and the existence of predictable relationships between variables. Given the scope of this exercise, we limit our findings to a high-level assessment of key indicators associated with the pillars without proving a specific quantum for how much funding each pillar might generate.
**Domestic revenues mobilization**

Table 5 shows that all of the countries in the sub-region experienced a growth shock in 2020 due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from -18.6 per cent in Maldives to 3.8 per cent in Bangladesh. Following this shock, all of the economies in the sub-region are forecast to rebound with 7.4 per cent average annual real GDP growth from 2021 to 2025. However, the real GDP growth rates are forecast to remain below 5 per cent for Afghanistan, Pakistan (until 2024) and Sri Lanka. Moreover, Bangladesh and Nepal are not forecast to reach their pre-COVID-19 GDP growth rates over this period. These subdued macroeconomic outlooks dampen the potential that tax windfalls could finance the budget impacts of COVID-19 on the education sector.

In addition to potential tax windfalls associated with high rates of economic growth, countries may wish to investigate the option of financing the COVID-19 budget impacts through additional tax revenues. In this regard, Table 6 presents the relative size of tax revenue collections in each country. All of the other countries in the sub-region had either relatively stable or increasing tax collections prior to COVID-19. The level of tax collections is generally moderate, which signals that there may be room to raise additional domestic revenues. However, the IMF note two key challenges that limit tax revenue collection in the South Asia sub-region.\(^{133}\) The first is weak tax administration, which particularly affects Pakistan and Bangladesh. The second is reduced tax bases due to large informal economies, which as a percentage of non-agricultural employment comprised 88.5 per cent in Bangladesh, 83.6 per cent in India, 86.4 per cent in Nepal, 78.4 per cent in Pakistan, and 62.1 per cent in Sri Lanka in 2013.\(^ {134}\) Improvements in either of these two areas could generate significant additional fiscal space to finance the education sectors without raising tax rates or introducing additional tax instruments.

### Table 5 | Real GDP Growth, 2019 - 2025

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2021</th>
<th>2022</th>
<th>2023</th>
<th>2024</th>
<th>2025</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>-8.4%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>-5.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>-0.5%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>-10.3%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>-18.6%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>-0.4%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>-4.6%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IMF, 2021\(^{135}\)

### Table 6 | Tax Revenue as a Per Cent of GDP, 2016 - 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IMF, 2021\(^{136}\)
**Deficit financing**

Deficit financing is another option to fund the COVID-19 budget impacts, especially the capital expenditure portions. However, many countries in the sub-region have relatively high gross debt stocks (Table 7). Bhutan and Maldives have debt levels in excess of their annual GDP. Although slightly less, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka also have high levels of debt. There are also additional restrictions on public debt in Pakistan due to the fiscal consolidation conditions attached to the IMF bailout. Although Afghanistan and Bangladesh have relatively lower levels of public debt, their ability to sustainably borrow is undermined by their weak tax revenue systems. Moreover, the conflict in Afghanistan complicates fiscal policy decisions as the state does not control all of the sources of revenue and there is a heavy reliance on foreign aid. Given all of these considerations, deficit financing is not an obvious source of funds for the education sector in the sub-region.

**Official development assistance**

Countries could either utilize official development assistance to directly fund the budget impacts caused by COVID-19 on the education sector, or to fund expenditure in another sector and then redirect those funds towards the education sector. Given the relatively limited value of official development assistance, it is likely that this pillar could only partially fund the budget impacts. Official development assistance is also often limited to specific programmes such as feeding schemes for vulnerable children, and capital expenditures such as WASH infrastructure. As such, countries should not rely on this pillar to fund recurrent expenditures like compensation of employees or procurement of goods and services. Another consideration is the potential influence of lending institutions over countries public policies and programmes, especially for countries with weak domestic revenue systems. This external influence might fragment policy making and lead to inefficiencies.

Table 8 presents the official development assistance status for the countries in the sub-region. All countries within the sub-region are eligible for International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) funding, except Afghanistan and Nepal. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan are also eligible for International Development Assistance (IDA) funding due to their relatively low gross national income levels and weak creditworthiness to borrow on markets.

---

**TABLE 7 | GOVERNMENT GROSS DEBT AS A PERCENT OF GDP, 2019-2025**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2021</th>
<th>2022</th>
<th>2023</th>
<th>2024</th>
<th>2025</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>104.4%</td>
<td>121.3%</td>
<td>125.7%</td>
<td>121%</td>
<td>114.5%</td>
<td>104.3%</td>
<td>97.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
<td>89.3%</td>
<td>89.9%</td>
<td>89.5%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
<td>88.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>118.3%</td>
<td>119.2%</td>
<td>116.7%</td>
<td>113.9%</td>
<td>110%</td>
<td>106.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
<td>47.4%</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>85.6%</td>
<td>872%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
<td>73.6%</td>
<td>69.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>86.8%</td>
<td>98.3%</td>
<td>98.3%</td>
<td>97.8%</td>
<td>97.7%</td>
<td>97.3%</td>
<td>96.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IMF, 2021
Conclusions from the financial analysis

The importance of education within the sub-regional development policy is emphasized by the demographic situation. Countries can be classified into four categories based on demographic characteristics and future development potential: pre-dividend (high fertility rates); early-dividend (declining fertility rates); late-dividend (low fertility rates); post-dividend (below-replacement fertility rates). According to the United Nations Population Fund, the demographic dividend is the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population’s age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population (15 to 64) is larger than the non-working-age share of the population. In other words, countries in the early-dividend and late-dividend stages can experience a boost in economic productivity as there are increasing numbers of people in the workforce relative to the number of dependents. Alternatively, countries in the post-dividend stage have high dependency ratios, with a shrinking share of working-age people. Figure 16 reveals that all the countries are in the early-dividend stage, except Sri Lanka which has already entered the late-dividend stage.
The opportunity to reap demographic dividends occurs during a limited window that closes as the working population ages. In addition to the timing of countries’ transition to the late-dividend and post-dividend stages, the importance of education investment is further emphasized by the degree to which the dependency ratios (the ratio of those not in the labour force to those in the labour force – i.e., the pressure on the productive population) are set to increase. Figure 17 shows that the dependency ratios are set to rise significantly for all countries in the sub-region from about 2050. The most dramatic increases are in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka where they are forecast to roughly double by 2100. This places extreme importance on the human capital development of the current cohort of children, who will begin to enter the labour force and remain part of the working-age population until up to 2082.

The early- and late-dividend stages for most countries in the sub-region potentially offer to boost economic productivity. However, decreased fertility rates do not automatically result in the economic benefits associated with a demographic dividend. To realize the benefits, countries must invest in the appropriate policies and programmes. The World Bank explains that education attainment is critical as it has implications for the future labour supply, and hence potential output. Potential dividends will be constrained if countries fail to ensure that children can access quality education and nutrition that enables them to be employed in high-productivity jobs. Moreover, if countries fail to adequately invest in education, then the upcoming bulge in the labour force may pose an unemployment and fiscal problem, wherein the skills mismatch could force a high number of workers either into the informal sector or out of the labour force and thus out of the income tax net. Linked to this problem is also a social protection liability, which is amplified by the rising dependency ratios.

Although COVID-19 has resulted in significant expenditure pressures on the education sector, it is critical that countries prioritize these demands. The marginal shocks to the education budgets must be viewed in relation to the opportunity costs of neglecting these expenditures. In addition to strengthening the social contract between government and citizens by protecting access to education, which is a key social service, countries also risk foregoing potential demographic dividends if they fail to strengthen their education systems to catch up the lost learning and provide a safe environment for children to return to school. These dividends and a strong social contract will help to generate additional future tax revenues, which will offset (if not fully cover) the financing currently required to respond to COVID-19. Moreover, supporting quality education may generate potential expenditure savings by avoiding costly alternative welfare support programmes.

Source: United Nations, 2021

FIGURE 17 | DEPENDENCY RATIOS, 2000 - 2100

[Graph showing dependency ratios for various countries from 2000 to 2100]
Given these considerations, the countries should investigate all available revenue sources to ensure that the education sector has sufficient resources to respond to the shocks presented by COVID-19, including re-allocating funds from other sectors. In this context, countries in the sub-region need to review the extent to which current budgets are used efficiently and equitably to ensure that there is no wastage in the system and the precious funds that are available are reaching those who need it the most – the marginalized and vulnerable in society.

In terms of building education systems back better in the longer term, the negative budget shocks imposed by COVID-19 may provide the required impetus and financing to raise the historically low education budgets in most countries in the sub-region towards the 6 per cent of GDP targeted by UNESCO. This would rapidly shift the South Asia towards the social states achieved in Europe, where it took 100 years to increase education budgets from 2 per cent of national income in 1910 to 6 per cent in 2010.143
Challenges, positive responses and lessons learned during the pandemic
While clear guidelines and SOPs help guide school communities in the multiple facets of safe operations, putting this into practice was difficult across the region where classrooms are often overcrowded, with inadequate or non-existent WASH facilities.

As noted above, South Asia is a large, diverse sub-region yet some challenges were common across countries, with the extent to which they affected learning being dictated by context. Five common challenges were identified during this assessment and are presented in this Chapter along with examples of positive responses and the lessons learned. In spite of the rapid and wide-ranging response needed to COVID-19, the research found examples of positive responses in all eight countries. While countries can learn from successful interventions across the region, which can help to inform responses to other emergencies in the future, it should also be recognized that there will be different outcomes in each country. Any replication of positive responses needs to be considered very carefully within the context of individual countries so that they are adapted for the local situation. The lessons learned are used in Chapter 5 to present recommendations for governments to consider going forward.

3.1 Challenge 1: Reopening schools safely

As Figure 4 shows, some schools are still not fully open and governments across the region continue to grapple with the challenges related to opening and reopening safely (see box below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What schools need to be able to do to open</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Put in place and maintain standard operating procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mitigate for the absence of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in many schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ensure parents and children are able to play their part in keeping the school safe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Provide data on implementation of procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Have financial resources to implement the plans</td>
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At the South Asia webinar, countries considered the following factors as the most challenging to keep schools open safely and the interventions requiring the most assistance:

- Addressing children’s learning loss
- MHPSS issues in children
- Attendance of children and reaching children at risk of dropping out (most marginalized)
- Implementing cross-sector interventions (WASH, Health, Child Protection)

These are looked at in more detail in the following sections.

As discussed in Chapter 2, many countries in the sub-region lack adequate WASH infrastructure and Figure 13 in Chapter 2 shows that capital funding for WASH infrastructure is one of the four significant activities driving the budget impact of COVID-19 in the sub-region. Many education systems simply do not have sufficient resources to fund adequate facilities and this issue has and will continue to affect the most marginalized communities more as they have less access to infrastructure resources and less influence in resourcing decisions.
An Education Management Information System (EMIS) is designed to efficiently manage, disseminate and analyse education data, to support education planning and decision-making. It has been used in some countries to develop emergency plans and help inform the COVID-19 response. For example, in Bhutan, the data includes enrolment, dropout, WASH facilities and achievement. However, more needs to be done in most countries in the region to ensure health and education managers at all levels have access to cross-sectoral data and the management routines are in place which would allow for more specific and timely identification of need enabling targeting of inputs and resources.

A safe environment is a pre-requisite to the delivery of school health services, for example, immunization, once schools reopen and to ensure the safe operation of school canteens. Where schools are not able to reopen canteens due to safety concerns (children are asked to bring their own food), provision for the vulnerable remains an ongoing concern and neglect of this issue is associated with increased school drop-out, particularly for girls. This and issues around protection and safeguarding are included under Challenge 4.

Positive responses

The primary concern regarding safe operations in all countries of South Asia has been to develop, implement and monitor guidelines and procedures for reopening of schools. Two major components of this include the assessment and improvement of school WASH facilities and communicating COVID-19 health protection messages to teachers, children and parents in the wider community.

Across the region, countries struggled at all levels to collect and use real-time, disaggregated data on the status of safety in each school.
Safe school reopening guidelines

All eight South Asian countries developed school reopening guidelines and put checklists in place for schools and sub-national authorities to monitor their implementation.

Development of WASH facilities

Across the region, significant efforts have been made to improve schools’ WASH facilities which had been previously neglected in many schools. In some countries, this has required the repurposing of existing funds for the construction of WASH facilities plus cleaning and sanitizing once schools have reopened. In Sri Lanka, UNICEF supported age-specific communication for behavioural change and the set-up of handwashing facilities across 1,000 schools. In Maldives, UNICEF provided communications materials for teachers, students and parents on infection prevention, hygiene and well-being, reaching approximately 90,000 people, which built confidence in school reopening. With support from USAID, UNICEF provided soap, disinfectants, and cleaning supplies for all 212 public schools in Maldives that serve a total of 76,481 students.

Cross-sector collaboration, increased financing and cross-sector monitoring

Within the region, Sri Lanka is one of the countries which has demonstrated noticeable success in managing a swift and effective response to COVID-19 in terms of safe school closure and reopening by using cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination, increased financing and cross-sectoral monitoring.

Case study findings: Maldives

Guidelines were drawn up by the MoE with support from the Health Protection Agency and WHO. The Guidelines state how the MoE and schools are to respond to and communicate four different alert levels for COVID-19. Responsibilities were allocated to MoE, schools, the Educational Supervision and Quality Improvement Division (ESQID) of MoE, and the Health Protection Agency (HPA) and demonstrate good cross-sectoral planning. Overcrowding in schools in Male’ is a major challenge in terms of protecting the health of students. In its Emergency Response Plan the Government of Maldives has allocated funds to build additional classrooms in schools in Male’ to address this, focusing on schools where overcrowding is particularly problematic. In addition, based on the Safe School Reopening Guidelines, schools adopted different approaches to reducing congestion, including staggered class times, or having students on campus in shifts, or on alternate days.
CHALLENGES, POSITIVE RESPONSES AND LESSONS LEARNED

**Case study findings: Sri Lanka**

**Cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination:** Close coordination between the MoE and the Ministry of Health (MoH), specifically the School Health Department of the Family Health Bureau under the MoH and the Department for Health and Nutrition under the MoE, enabled a prompt and complete understanding of the situation. From early on the roles and responsibilities of all counterparts were clearly identified. Systematic planning from health and education ministries resulted in a high level of readiness for reopening. Co-creation was used as the MoH produced detailed guidelines on health protection for school children (how students travel, use of materials, co-curricula activities, etc.) which helped steer MoE protocols and led to the central Secretariat of the MoE issuing a detailed circular on school reopening and how this was to be done. Health authorities helped communicate these messages to parents. Health staff in all but the four high-risk areas, had time to support schools in health promotion, working with school health clubs and were supported by public health inspectors for promotional activities on safety measures.

**Increased financing:** The MoE diverted development funds to address the urgent WASH needs of schools, while schools in more deprived areas were given additional facilities to support their reopening (equitable access for all children was a government concern). Both private sector agencies and communities contributed to the building of WASH facilities.

**Cross-sector monitoring:** Verification that schools were ready for reopening was based on an initial inspection by the local education authority, followed by a final inspection through the MoH and the go-ahead by the Epidemiology Unit of the MoH, beginning with low-risk districts. Public Health Inspectors under the leadership of the local ‘Medical Officers for Health’ have been responsible for assessing the adequacy of infrastructure facilities to maintain Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures using a checklist.

**Lessons learned**

Protocols and guidelines for reopening schools safely were developed, yet the extent to which they were implemented is unclear and hampered by resource constraints.

Adapting national plans to local context and involving all stakeholders improves teacher, student and parental confidence for the safe reopening of schools. Countries in South Asia were ill-prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. Government and non-governmental organizations have come together across the sub-region to develop solutions and provide resources to mitigate the shock. This has included UN agencies and other international organizations, local organizations and communities. This support includes provision of frameworks to draw response plans and safe operation guidelines, and financial and project-based resources. Communities have contributed labour and other resources to ensure schools can open safely and are important stakeholders in building resilience and bringing about behaviour change.

Current monitoring systems don't provide information on whether schools are safe or not and don't link health and education data together. Although guidelines and health protocols have been produced, for most countries monitoring data about implementation is unavailable. It is therefore very difficult to assess the measures that were taken and their impact. In countries where there is strong coordination and cross-sectoral collaboration at national and local level, evidence suggests that this has led to more effective and efficient planning, management and implementation of safe operations in schools.
Across the region, access and participation in learning while the schools were closed was inequitable. The two main challenges countries faced were identifying their most vulnerable and marginalized children and understanding their needs, and then addressing these needs effectively.

3.2 Challenge 2: Reaching the most marginalized

While COVID-19 has prompted an unprecedented speed of response to some issues, the challenges of reaching the most vulnerable and most marginalized persist across the region. Governments lacked the data they needed to identify and target different groups of marginalized learners.

Each learner faced their own challenges, including young learners, those with disabilities, girls, those who spoke minority languages or a combination of these factors.

For already-marginalized children, including those with disabilities, those living in rural areas and those living in areas affected by conflict, their difficulties in accessing and meaningfully participating in learning during school closures were exacerbated.

Many countries did not hold child-level data prior to the pandemic, which would have enabled them to identify and target these marginalized children with relevant and specific interventions. Furthermore, there was little real-time, coordinated monitoring during the pandemic, which meant that it was difficult to know how many, and the type of vulnerable and marginalized learners who had been reached and the extent to which they were participating and learning. Data on the presence of TVs, radios and internet devices could not be used to infer that children in those households would have access to those devices at the right time to access learning. Even in contexts where there were community-based initiatives using paper-based materials such as Afghanistan, reporting on children accessing the materials was scant. Availability of data was better in smaller countries like Bhutan and Maldives.

Many of the education systems in the region are characterized as large, centralized education systems and as a result, were somewhat less flexible to adapting to the myriad of vulnerabilities affecting the most marginalized groups. In these circumstances, implementation of centrally-developed plans tended to be the responsibility of sub-national and school level actors. Local actors had the knowledge and experience of their context and communities and were able to reach further into communities. For example, in community-based education settings in Afghanistan, stakeholders supported through NGOs worked closely with the central Government to support to reach vulnerable children. Similarly, in Bangladesh, the Government and NGOs collaborated at the local level to collect information and support disadvantaged children. In Nepal-

“At a time when the decentralisation process still needed to be fully operationalised, and within the context of existing capacity constraints, the COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges for each layer of Government. Each local government had its own contextual challenges and different levels of capacity to manage the response comprehensively as it immediately changed priorities and created an urgent need for action to respond to the pandemic.”

The Foundation for Development Management (FDM) FDM, Nepal Institute for Policy and Research (NIPoRe) report commented that despite the limitations of

At the South Asia webinar, the two groups of children identified as most vulnerable and marginalized were those with disabilities and those living in remote places.
local governments they were able to find localised solutions and mobilise resources to provide a rapid, response to the crisis. This is borne out in education by the way in which local governments used local knowledge and understanding to adapt resources for alternative learning modalities to reach as many learners as possible.148

The challenge with this local approach, however, was that its effectiveness was uneven as it depended on the priorities, enthusiasm, capacity and presence of local actors within communities, which resulted in some marginalized communities becoming more disadvantaged as a result.

There is a vast digital divide across the region, adversely affecting the most marginalized children. Across South Asia just 13 per cent of children and young people have access to internet at home, with the poorest and those living in rural areas having far less access than their richer and more urban peers (Figure 18).149 Access and connectivity to digital devices and internet is very low in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives and Pakistan and access to TV, radio and internet is low in Afghanistan.

**FIGURE 18 | PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 25 YEARS OF LESS WITH INTERNET ACCESS AT HOME**

![Bar chart showing internet access by economic status and location.](source)

**FIGURE 19 | ESTIMATED REACH VS ACTUAL REACH OF TECHNOLOGY**

- % of children with access to technology for learning
- % of children using technology for learning
- % of children well-supported by teachers in using technology for learning
- % of children learning effectively

![Diagram illustrating technology reach.](source)

Measured through a proxy indicator in South Asian household surveys: self-reported perceptions of learning a lot less, or less, during school closures compared to when schools were open.

Elsewhere, paper-based learning modalities were set up, usually developed centrally and then distributed down to school or community level. The youngest learners, whose reading skills are yet to be developed fully, had particular challenges accessing and participating in remote learning, and required intense support from parents or caregivers. For families who could not provide this support, for example due to their own low levels of literacy, or the need to go out and provide an income for the household, this support wasn’t available. Again, little information is available about the use of these printed materials.

A UNICEF survey found that three countries in South Asia reported adopting specific measures to support the learning of children with disabilities, but five countries did not. From the eight case studies, it appears that children with special education needs or disabilities were not prioritized while the schools were closed. Depending on a child’s specific needs, they may require assistive devices, adapted materials to use at home e.g., in braille or specialized support from a trained professional. Although children with disabilities were identified as a marginalized group in COVID-19 response planning, there were no indications of resources that had been made or adapted for children with disabilities to use while away from school. There were some pockets of positive responses, which are described in next section.

Positive responses

The case study examples from Afghanistan, Bhutan, India and Maldives, show the ways in which they reached out to marginalized communities.
Case study findings: Afghanistan, Bhutan, India

In Afghanistan, the Education in Emergencies Working Group was able to quickly develop paper-based self-learning guides for the community teachers to use with their learners through Community-Based Education (CBE). Materials, largely focused on revision, were developed centrally and teachers were trained on the materials and messages around COVID-19. They then visited families to deliver weekly learning packs and supported children. The approach was supported by the community and meant that learners were able to continue learning. Families were also reported to have become more engaged with their children's learning at this time. The ability of the CBE system to rapidly develop and distribute self-learning materials and support teachers to share messages with communities about the pandemic was commendable. This was not cost-free though and it would be too expensive for the Ministry of Education to adopt the same approach for learners across all public schools.

In Bhutan, the Government put the protection of the most vulnerable communities at the centre of the country’s national response plan. Children with disabilities were granted a special pass from the Government so that they could spend some time outside during lockdown. School reopening guidelines in Bhutan included a check on whether the schools have provided additional support for children at risk and with disabilities.

In India, the education sector benefited from numerous solutions and delivery mechanisms to support learning. These included core remote learning solutions (traditional tools such as textbooks and home visits, tech-enabled and mass communication solutions such as WhatsApp, YouTube, TV, and radio, and blended solutions that combine face-to-face with e-learning) and learning enabling solutions (such as distribution of mid-day meals, distribution of sanitation kits, and monetary support). The central Government made a strong effort to create a repository of learning content and implemented EdTech interventions, in partnership with several NGOs such as EkStep, Khan Academy and Azim Premji Foundation, to drive access. At state level, governments developed their own solutions suitable for their context. For example, Gujarat has focused on distributing QR coded textbooks; Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have focused on learning programmes on TV to expand access; Assam has been distributing worksheets along with mid-day meals to ensure continuity of learning; and Kerala has also focused on textbook distribution and WhatsApp groups. According to a UNICEF survey, WhatsApp was the most-used channel for remote learning, followed by textbooks.

As part of the emphasis on safety at home during school closures, teachers in Maldives were asked to maintain regular contact with students and parents either via Viber messages or applications based (Google Meet/Zoom) calls, both for checking the safety of pupils and to minimize the risk of pupils dropping out of the school system. Learners with special educational needs were also identified as a special concern and support included one-to-one video teaching and emphasizing support to parents.

Lessons learned

Reaching the most marginalized required a range of delivery mechanisms.

To keep all children learning there needs to be a comprehensive approach, focused on learning, which provides teacher support, a modified curriculum, and a variety of delivery mechanisms. With this range of measures the majority of children can be reached. However, there are still many children who will not have participated in any learning (or participated less than others) and these children need specific targeting to break down barriers to learning.

The first lesson learned was that countries need stronger monitoring systems in place to enable them to know their children and the challenges they face so that they can put
effective measures in place to overcome them. To help achieve this, information on the children who were not being reached and also who were not participating was key.

For example, if more information had been available about children with disabilities, provision could have been targeted to meet their specific needs. Inclusion of organizations working with people with disabilities in the development of strategies and policies, and consultation with parents of children with disabilities would have helped understand and more effectively reach this group of children.

This leads to the second lesson: to reach the most marginalized, local solutions are needed. The rapid assessment case study in Afghanistan demonstrated how some of the world’s most marginalized children could continue their learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic due to effective stakeholder coordination, planning, mobilization of resources and community support. Community-based education was set up in response to crises and lack of access to formal education; from its outset it was designed to be resilient to the climatic and political shocks often experienced in Afghanistan. The effective coordination of the Education in Emergencies Working Group in responding to the pandemic meant that response plans and support could quickly be set in place.

Full participation can only be achieved when it is a clear focus of education planning. In Pakistan, the Government partnered with private sector organizations to enhance the education technology response during the pandemic. At the start of designing their response, they worked towards reaching the greatest number of children, but with each step in their response, the focus on the yet-to-be-reached children increased and the scope of the technology being used widened to take this into account. Although not yet formally assessed, it is clear that this engagement between government and private sector has enabled a much greater reach and reach and coverage than would otherwise have been possible.153

3.3 Challenge 3: Existing low levels of learning and the learning divide

As described in Chapter 2, prior to the pandemic there were existing low levels of learning across South Asia. Home learning reduced learning time and required a more independent approach from students, support from parents and a different way of working for teachers. Teachers, parents and students were largely unprepared for this switch to remote learning. This change in modality, alongside increased external pressures on households has presented some key challenges for meeting learning needs both during school closures and on return to school.

Pre-primary children are the most in need of face-to-face support but were not prioritized.

Pre-primary children needed a different type of provision from older learners but were not prioritized. Early childhood education is essential for the development of foundational skills for young children. The year of pre-primary education which is offered by all countries is vital for school readiness and increases their chances of completing primary education.154

“Pre-primary programmes typically employ a holistic approach to introducing young children to organized instruction outside the family context, aiming to support children’s cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. They also help children develop many of the skills they need for academic readiness and entry into primary education.”155

Given the importance of early childhood education (ECE) for children, there was a significant challenge for countries to provide for young children during school closures to ensure that they received the learning
opportunities they needed. TV broadcasts and online provision should only be a very small proportion of learning opportunities for young children, as they can’t provide the emotional and physical experiences that they need.

As well as this, children don’t have the independent learning skills to take advantage of these modalities and need support from parents, caregivers, teachers, older siblings, community volunteers, etc. Yet, young children were not prioritized in the national response to continuity of learning or school reopening. The response relied on parents to be able to give support and also know what support to give.

As a result, the youngest, with the most need for cognitive and socio-emotional development opportunities spent the longest periods away from school and received the least support. As shown above, this absence from education could have a profound impact on their futures.

“ECE promotes physical health, emotional safety, social connections and engaged learning. Reopening ECE settings can provide children with much-needed emotional support, learning opportunities and offers reliable childcare options for parents returning to work.”

Many parents struggled to help their children with home learning.

During school closures, more was expected of parents to support their children to learn, at a time when many were facing increased pressures due to family and work commitments, alongside anxieties around decreases in household incomes, and yet they received little guidance to help them support home schooling. There was a lack of communication to let them know what the children are supposed to learn (content) and should be able to do (competencies and skills). Parents’ level of education and availability at home would have a significant impact on their children’s ability to study and learn from home, and parents/caregivers in marginalized families would be less able to support this than their more advantaged peers.

Teachers faced multiple demands on their time, but received very little training and support.

There were multiple demands on teachers during the switch to remote learning for which they were ill-prepared and received little training and support. Teachers were expected to embrace a new way of teaching, which involved less contact with students and using a combination of approaches, including, high-tech, low-tech and no-tech modalities. This required more planning for the different modalities, ensuring that printed materials reached students and keeping in touch with students to ensure that they were completing the tasks. Many teachers were also asked to be the main contact point between the system and households, monitoring health, well-being and protection issues as well as supporting learning. This change in role also increased teachers’ workload. Many teachers faced competing demands on their own time and lacked the protected space and time they needed to work effectively from home.

Across the region there is a divide between teachers who had digital tools at home, such as mobile phones and laptops and had the experience of using ICT in schools and those who did not have tools and/or experience. Where teachers had already been trained on how to adopt technology into their lesson plans and had been using tools such as interactive boards, tablets and apps within their classrooms, they were able to transition to teaching online classes, using online supplemental materials and developing lesson plans so as to maximize the continuity of learning for their students. Most countries recognized the importance of supporting teachers and included training and support within their response plans, but implementation was varied, exacerbated by restrictions on movement and large gatherings, and teachers’ unequal access to technology and the internet. Ministries also had to adapt materials and approaches to make them appropriate for remote learning, while also developing their digital capability to deliver training remotely.

When learners return to schools, the unevenness of provision means that it is likely there will be wider disparities in what they know, understand and can do, which will need to be addressed as schools reopen, however governments and teachers have limited data on the extent of learning loss and teachers are often unprepared to deal with individual learners’ specific needs with whole class didactic teaching often the norm.

The World Bank carried out simulations that consider three different lengths of school closures – 3, 5 and 7 months and considered different learning mitigation approaches (mainly remote learning) by their levels of effectiveness. This has created three global scenarios – optimistic,
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intermediate and pessimistic. The results show that “both the global level of schooling as well as learning will fall... COVID-19 could result in a loss of between 0.3 and 0.9 years of schooling adjusted for quality.”

Although the effectiveness of the remote provision is not known, it is likely that due to the length of their school closures, and the inequality of alternative provision, the South Asian countries fall into the pessimistic and intermediate categories with children losing a number of years schooling in the higher range of the simulation (Figure 20).

Assessment and remediation

During school closures, levels of participation and learning were not systematically measured. Unless teachers reached out directly to individual learners (as some did), there was not much knowledge of what children understood from the materials. In addition, this lack of assessment means that it is unclear which channels, materials and approaches had the most efficacy in improving learning outcomes. While it is understood, from simulations such as the World Bank described above, that there will have been learning loss, which will vary among children, the actual extent of this is not known. As schools reopen it will not be sufficient for teachers to continue teaching the curriculum with the assumption that children are at the same point as they would have been without this extended period away from school. This presents two major challenges for teachers and curriculum planners:

1. How to assess the levels of learners' knowledge and skills, then provide remediation through teaching at the right level.

2. How to adapt the curriculum so that there is coverage of essential subjects and items, and learning loss is not increased.

Assessing children on their return to school will be critical, so that targeted support can be given, and they don’t fall further behind. While learning is not a linear process, understanding of concepts and development of skills build up over time and so if foundation skills and knowledge are not secure, then children will find it difficult to access higher-order learning. If teachers don’t know the point at which learners are re-entering the curriculum, many children will miss out on those vital stages of development because the teaching won’t meet their needs and learning loss will accumulate. Following on from assessment there needs to be remediation approaches to support children to progress.

Modelling has been conducted by the Brookings Institute to analyse the likely impact of different remediation methods on learning following school closures (Figure 21) found that 3 months of school closure on a Grade 3 pupil, equates to:

- One year of learning loss by Grade 10 if no remediation is in place.
- Half a year of learning loss by Grade 10 if one year of remediation is provided.
- Over a year of learning gain by Grade 10 if one year of remediation is combined with instruction reorientation (prioritized curriculum, focus on foundational skills, formative assessment, on-going teaching at the right level) which is continued for subsequent years.

Remediation is a long-term strategy to improve learning with both immediate actions once schools re-open and longer-term actions to integrate assessment and needs-based planning into the curriculum (Figure 22).
At the South Asia webinar, countries prioritized adaptation of the school calendar, curriculum simplification, accelerated learning programmes and differentiated teaching (teaching at the right level) for mitigating learning loss once schools reopened.
Governments will need to consider how to prioritize and refocus the curriculum once schools reopen. Given that many countries’ curricula generally have too much content for the age of the learners, the prioritization provides an opportunity to reduce curriculum content and focus on some key areas. For example, in basic education, foundational literacy and numeracy are the cornerstones of learning and enable access to other areas of the curriculum. Well-being has been raised as a major issue affecting children after this extended period away from school and should be integrated into the curriculum in every school year and co-curricular and extra-curricular activities play important roles in the development of non-examined life skills.

Positive responses

Despite the huge challenges in this area, the case studies did identify some positive responses.

Although there were few mentions of support to pre-primary or early childhood development (ECD) within the case studies, there were a couple of positive responses worth mentioning whereby the closures seemed to result in parents becoming more engaged.

In some countries with longer school closures, assessment and remediation are yet to begin. However, some of those countries with shorter school closures have begun to put these mechanisms in place.

Case study findings: Bangladesh and Bhutan

In Bangladesh, UNICEF and Chittagong Development Board had worked in partnership on a pre-primary programme prior to COVID-19. Once COVID-19 struck, they formed a technical group and developed a two-month curriculum, focused on basic learning activities including health, hygiene and protection, supported by basic learning materials for any parent to use at home. They built the capacity of para workers who then held orientations with parents. Pre-COVID-19 they had found it difficult to engage parents with the programme, but during the crisis parents became much more involved in their children’s learning. In Bhutan, pre-pandemic, approximately 25 per cent of 2- to 5-year olds had been receiving regular face-to-face development support from a trained facilitator. At the beginning of the pandemic, the facilitators were able to visit the children, but once the lockdown measures were introduced, they had to use WeChat and online mechanisms to communicate with parents. Although the facilitators were not able to support the children in the same way, they were able to support the parents who were in turn able to spend quality time with their children. It was reported that parents became more supportive as a result.

Case study findings: Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka

In Bhutan, during school closures the Government developed an adapted curriculum which focused on core foundational skills in primary and combined subjects at the higher grades to reduce coverage with the philosophy that children could concentrate on a small achievable amount of learning. Remote assessment was integrated into the programme.

The content of each subject from Key Stages I-IV has been rationalized in different ways and scaled down to the most fundamental concepts that learners need. For example, for classes IX and X the content of physics, chemistry, biology and environmental science, were compressed into functional sciences. For Key Stage I, the curriculum for classes PP-III was combined and the number of concepts within each subject reduced. An example of this was for number and operations in the National Curriculum where the key learning areas from across the age range were contracted into eight broad learning areas, which were covered by the videos and Self-Instructional Materials (SIM). Learning was assessed regularly and used to make decisions around promotion when schools reopened.
“All remote learning that happened in Bhutan last year was assessed remotely, as part of Continuous Formative Assessment as well as for master of learning objectives set out in the Adopted and Prioritised Curriculum. At the end of every video lesson there were follow-up activities that children had to complete and submit to their teachers through Google Classroom, WeChat or WhatsApp. The self-instructional materials had an assessment included at the end of each learning segment. In fact, all the children from pre-primary through Grade VIII were automatically promoted to their next higher grades by the schools, following certain competencies (exceeded, met, approaching etc.). The learning logs were maintained by the respective subject teachers.”

In Maldives a positive impact was the catalytic effect of accelerating teachers’ and school managers’ uptake of digital opportunities for teaching and learning and for administration. Furthermore, UNICEF worked with the Government to re-imagine education, training over 3,800 teachers for digital learning on Google Suite, and a further 3,000 planned for later in 2021.

In Sri Lanka, in Uva province, the MoE with support from UNICEF, took the initiative to minimize the learning gaps in primary education after the first long school closure due to COVID-19. They conducted diagnostic tests with students in Grades 1 to 4, based on the findings the curriculum was reorganized to prioritize competencies and associated lesson plans in line with the multi-level teaching pedagogy to help children catch up.

Lessons learned

The pandemic has exacerbated the existing learning gap.

There are wide variations in learning levels across the region and within countries and as stated above the pandemic has increased this divide. Guidance and support for parents and teachers could have increased their ability to help children learn. Narrowing the learning gap will depend upon the skills of the teachers and how they are able to assess and teach children at their right level so that they can progress.

Building assessment into remote learning programmes is critical to enable a smooth transition between remote and classroom learning. Knowledge of what learners know and can do will help teachers respond to children’s needs and give them tailored support to progress, minimizing learning loss. Assessment when schools reopen will help inform the level of children’s learning on their return to school so that teachers can plan appropriately.

Teachers needed to have adequate preparation and training to enable them to manage remote learning.

Making provision of guidance and support for teachers a priority at the start of school closures could have improved their ability to help children to progress. Where teachers had some level of digital literacy, they were able to take advantage of the situation and work more effectively with digital learning approaches. For example, in Maldives where there was some infrastructure in place and raised levels of digital literacy, teachers were able to quickly provide a more comprehensive response.

A pre-COVID-19 focus on teachers improving students’ 21st century skills could have built the competencies that learners needed to be more independent and therefore help them cope better with remote learning.

Building assessment into remote learning programmes is critical to enable a smooth transition between remote and classroom learning. Knowledge of what learners know and can do will help teachers respond to children’s needs and give them tailored support to progress, minimizing learning loss.
The curriculum needs to be flexible to allow for significantly different levels of learning on return to school.

Remediation combined with long-term reorientation of instruction to align with children's learning levels will be required so that the effects of the lack of formal schooling are not prolonged. It is reported that schools will assess learners on their return to school, but it is unclear how much flexibility they will be granted from ministries to teach according to the needs of the children and make provision for those with greater or special needs.

The majority of countries across South Asia use a traditional way of teaching based upon a centralized syllabus and it could be argued that this hampered teachers’ ability to be flexible and adaptable.

Teachers were suddenly required to have the ability to use a variety of teaching methods to make remote learning interesting and support learners. However, education systems have not yet been reoriented towards the acquisition and use of 21st century skills which prioritize essential skills such as critical-thinking and problem-solving, creativity and innovation, collaboration, communication, information and communications technology (ICT) and information literacy, self-regulation and learning skills. A pre-COVID-19 focus on these areas could have built the skills that learners needed to be more independent and therefore help them cope better with remote learning.165

Pre-primary children needed to be prioritized for remote provision which suited their needs and those of their caregivers, and prioritized when schools reopened so that they returned to face-to-face learning as soon as possible. It would have been possible to prioritize this age group when schools reopened as the evidence around infection and transmission showed that younger children were less likely to have the virus and transmit it.

3.4 Challenge 4: Health and well-being and protection

Children need to have good physical and mental health and feel safe if they are to learn well. The importance of investing in children’s health and well-being is essential for long-term success for the child, community and economy.166 This section looks at the challenges related to coping with the COVID-19 pandemic in the region, and the secondary challenges that arose due to the schools being closed. These challenges related to children’s nutrition, mental health and psycho-social issues and risks relating to well-being and protection.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, many countries in South Asia had existing emergency response plans prior to the pandemic. However, these were largely designed to address natural disasters and were not readily adaptable to the specific response demanded by a health pandemic. Earmarked budgets for such events often did not exist. Specific COVID-19 response plans were rapidly developed in the early months of the pandemic, often led by Ministries of Education together with various taskforces represented by multiple stakeholders.

In many countries in the sub-region, national and localized lockdowns restricted access to routine health and protection services for children.

For example, there was not widespread evidence of efforts to ensure ongoing provision of other essential services such as immunization, prevention and treatment of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Sri Lanka, however, provided for adolescents through the public health system and were attentive to catch-up campaigns once schools reopened. Community-based child protection programmes, and case management for children requiring supplementary personalized care, including those living with disabilities, and abuse victims have also been partially or completely suspended.167 Other lost school services include speech therapy, peer support groups as well as crucial deworming programmes which in many countries of South Asia have been highly valuable in preventing common parasitic worm infections.168

Nutritional deficiencies can have long-lasting effects on cognitive development and school closures as well as shrinking family income resulted in a reduction in the amount and quality of food children had access to.

Therefore, there is a long-term need to address the nutritional needs of the most vulnerable children and it is unclear if efforts to do so are equitable, effective and sustained. For many children in South Asian countries, free school meals are an important source of nutrition. In the 2020-2030 School Feeding Strategy document WFP estimates that around 73 million primary school children living in extreme poverty in 60 countries do not have access to national school feeding programmes or other health and nutrition school interventions such as deworming, supplementation and nutrition education.169 A recent study in The Lancet estimated that, due to lockdowns and severe mobility disruptions and food system disruptions, most lower- to middle-income countries will have an estimated average 79 per cent
Due to decreases in GNI per capita, it is projected that over 3.9 million additional children will suffer from wasting in 2020 across South Asia.171 Globally, additional investment in primary education could make a difference to children’s health. ‘Providing ... children with at least one meal a day would have an additional cost of around $4.6 billion annually, adding the essential school health package would increase the cost to $5.8 billion annually, which represents 2.5 per cent of the current annual investment in primary education. The return on this investment is a benefit–cost ratio estimated at around $20 for every dollar invested, and which leverages the greater than $210 billion a year investment in learning.’’

The well-being of children, parents and teachers were adversely affected during the pandemic. Learners of all ages faced increased levels of stress due to isolation, uncertainty and fear of the future. Parents were stressed by economic challenges and home learning as they tried to balance the roles of parent and teacher. Teachers struggled to combine work and family commitments and learn new teaching techniques in a very short space of time. Parental stress and the restrictions caused by lockdown increased physical and emotional abuse of children, and in many cases new use of the internet resulted in increases in online bullying and exposure to materials that are not suitable for children. Harmful social norms became more prevalent across the region as household financial insecurity increased cases of child labour and early marriage.

“...COVID-19 threatens harsher realities for many South Asian children. Some children may try to ease the financial strain on their families by going out to work. Other families may allow young daughters to be married to reduce the number of mouths to feed and in the hope that the girl will be better looked after by a husband.”

Positive responses

Cross-sectoral collaboration

In Bhutan, inter-ministerial collaboration has also been a feature of the Comprehensive National Response Plan, which aimed at strengthening the capacity of the health system to deliver response and recovery, and increase resilience, putting protection of the most vulnerable communities at the centre.174 Both Maldives and Sri Lanka demonstrated strong coordination between the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Health (MoH). In Sri Lanka, the historical collaboration between the two ministries, in which the MoH has played a significant role in public health measures in schools, meant that systems were already established and the roles of education and health players defined at the outset of the pandemic. From this base the response on the health and welfare of school communities was swiftly built and evidence suggests that this led to a broader and more effective health response. Given that protective measures against COVID-19 require behavioural change, there was a need for consistency of messaging throughout the country which reached all communities including the most marginalized. Gathering feedback which represented the views of a diverse population was also critical in this process so that strategies could be realistic, contextualized and effective. To do this, countries in South Asia were supported by international organizations as well as local NGOs, most of whom have an in-depth knowledge of the communities in which they work. This enabled interventions, to be targeted towards the hard to reach. Communication of messages regarding infection protection, mental health, parent support, etc., have been made through a range of channels including health providers, education officers, teachers, media and social media. UNICEF continues to support governments in promoting risk communication and community
engagement with over 465 million people reached across the region with key COVID-19 prevention messages.175

In Bangladesh health messages were mainstreamed into education visits and activities by the organization BRAC, while local government offices, NGOs and community health workers have helped spread messages in communities. Teachers were at the forefront of this community work, making contact with families, not only to ascertain learning needs, but also to enquire about their financial, health or food situation. Where needs were identified, teachers tried to link households into the NGO relief programmes. This is a good example of collaboration to provide a coordinated service to local communities.

In Sri Lanka, public health midwives were made responsible for all families in their catchment area, including adolescents. Families could seek advice from public health midwives on how to access specific health services throughout the period of lockdown. In low-risk areas, Medical Officers from the Health Ministry carried out routine school health inspections including school immunizations following reopening. In high-risk areas, immunizations were contingent on the availability of facilities which met COVID-19 safety standards. De-worming and weekly iron folate supplementation were offered while schools remained open, although the MoE acknowledges that normal high coverage reaching over 90 per cent of children may not have been achieved in 2020.

Maintaining good hygiene is not only limited to handwashing but covers a range of personal behaviours or practices that lead to cleanliness and good health. During the COVID-19 pandemic some governments have recognized the need to support girls with menstrual hygiene. In Nepal the Government recognized that loss of family income limited the ability of girls to afford sanitary pads, so in response they provided sanitary items to 1.3 million girls.176

The need to supplement school meals for the most vulnerable during school closures has been an area of concern by governments across the sub region. The World Food Programme (WFP) has been supporting countries to address this need in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal and India. Through mass media campaigns in Sri Lanka, families were encouraged to involve their children in growing healthy foods during school closures. Pakistan launched a $900 million cash transfer programme, secured to support 12 million vulnerable families while in April 2020, the Government of India announced the free provision of 5 kg of rice or wheat and 1 kg of preferred pulses per person each month to 800 million people for a period of three months.177 It is not clear how effective these efforts have been in reaching diverse categories of the most marginalized and vulnerable children in a sustained way.

Information from the country case studies suggests that during school closures, the majority of school health services ceased and access to public health services diminished. However, in many countries there was recognition of the need to address the mental health needs of children and their families, including stress related to increased domestic violence. Governments partnered largely with NGOs to establish or increase the number of helplines (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh) available to meet a growing need. In Maldives the MoE coordinated with schools to support the activities for the mental well-being of students as well as seeking to ensure providers were aware of referral to services for gender-based violence (GBV) and protection against sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and sexual and reproductive health services.168

As millions of children turn to online education, there is an increased risk of online abuse, which can have a severe impact on a student’s mental health, overall well-being and academic achievement. In India, as learning moved online, the National Council for Education and Training (NCERT) and UNESCO took steps to reduce the risk by highlighting safeguarding and well-being issues. Together, they developed communication material targeted at students, teachers and parents to spread awareness of safe online learning and to combat cyber-bullying.169 UNICEF also provided training and a manual relating to mental health and well-being for parents, caregivers and children.170

Across the region initiatives were taken to include psychological counselling and well-being as part of remote lessons, for example by BRAC in Bangladesh and through the community-based education in Afghanistan. Teachers have been widely encouraged to support the psychosocial needs of children on their return to school, however support to the mental health needs of teachers is given little mention. In Sri Lanka the Government included clear guidance in the Instructional Manual of Preparedness for Schools and other Educational Institutions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, on how to identify mental stress in children and support their psychosocial needs (Figure 24).

Lessons learned

Greater recognition of, action in and monitoring of broader health and well-being impacts is needed.

In terms of lessons learned relating to health, nutrition and well-being, recommendations made by high level
commissions from recent coronavirus pandemics have largely gone unheeded which may have contributed to lack of preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic. Resource constraints have led, in most instances, to a focus on a few key health issues in the education sector, chiefly: safety measures to enable the reopening of schools; education for communities on protection measures; helplines and; food distribution to address the loss of school meals for the vulnerable. While critical to address these, other significant health, psychosocial and welfare needs of children including child protection tend to have been neglected. The extent or duration of nutritional support is also unclear. Each can have a long-term impact on children’s development, far beyond school years.

As mentioned above, teachers, midwives and community health workers have taken on additional roles to support families and communities with messaging around COVID-19. In many contexts, teachers have also received information and support, if not training, on how to provide mental health and psychosocial support to children. Yet, much more needs to be done. Across the region, MHPSS needs to be given far higher priority. Mental health issues need to be built into the school curriculum, so children are more aware of their emotions and are supported to cope with them.

**A lack of monitoring means that the extent and the outcomes of interventions during the pandemic are largely unknown.**

Resources were prioritized for the implementation of responses. However, the lack of comprehensive monitoring data means that needs of different communities could not be identified easily and the full extent and effectiveness of implementation is not known. In addition, there is a need to strengthen cross-sectoral aspects of the response and recovery at school level, with WASH in Schools, school health, IPC and increased social and child protection needs. Therefore, there is also a need to strengthen the monitoring function of those cross-sectoral aspects of the response to ensure that they are indeed implemented. This may mean revising the way that data is being collected from schools through EMIS systems or expanding the system itself to link to other databases where this data is collected.

The data collected and aggregated needs to be accessible in easy-to-use formats and used in decision making at all levels. While NGOs and UN agencies such as UNICEF and UNESCO have conducted surveys to better understand some specific issues such as the status of mental health and protection issues, there is a lack of evidence from the countries studied that data has been collected and analysed to assess the impact of much depleted health, welfare and nutrition related services. This would allow for special attention to meet specific needs both during school closures or on reopening.

### 3.5 Challenge 5: Existing poverty levels

Across South Asia poverty and low GDP are at the root of many of the challenges.

“The priority for all South Asian governments is to contain the virus spread and protect their people, especially the poorest who face considerably worse health and economic outcomes.”

As shown in Figure 25, poverty levels vary across the region, with Maldives now classed as an upper-middle-income country with none of the population living on less than $1.90 per day. The level of poverty against this international measure of $1.90 a day is also low in Sri Lanka. Bangladesh and Nepal in contrast both have over 14 per cent of their population classed as living in extreme poverty.
poverty by this measure. Over the past 20 years, poverty across the region has been decreasing, although the rate of decline has slowed in recent years.

The World Bank highlights the effect that the COVID-19 crisis has had on poverty levels across the region, threatening to undo much of progress of the last 20 years in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. Figure 7 in Chapter 2 shows real annual GDP growth. All countries were predicted to have substantially lower growth rates with Maldives most adversely affected due to its reliance on the tourism industry. The responses to COVID-19, closed schools, restricted mobility, reduced economic activities and decreased household finances. Many workers across both formal and informal economies have lost jobs or have reduced incomes. The decline in GDP across the countries and reduction in remittances is predicted to force more families into deeper poverty across the globe, with the majority of the new extreme poor in South Asia. In Pakistan, for example, the Government estimates that there will be “14 million job losses increasing poverty levels for the first time in two decades.”

A World Bank press release predicts that the number of people in urban areas in extreme poverty will increase as result of the crisis. In Bhutan many of the population already in poverty are the rural poor. However, as they are subsistence farmers, they were mostly protected from the labour market shocks. Urban dwellers, many of whom relied on the service industry, were worst affected.

“Without policy actions, the COVID-19 crisis may trigger cycles of higher income inequality, lower social mobility among the vulnerable, and lower resilience to future shocks.”

In Sri Lanka, inequality has increased as much of the population was vulnerable due to “little job-related social protection and low earnings.”

This decrease in household finances will increase the risk of children dropping out from education, as parents’ ability to send their children to school could be affected. Hidden schooling costs (ancillary costs, transport, uniforms, etc.) can become a barrier to schooling for the poorest and there are widening disparities in terms of learning opportunities. The poor have less access to devices are less likely to have digital skills, and less likely to afford data costs (for mobiles). Many families will adopt negative coping mechanisms to manage, for example removing children from school or not sending them at all, subjecting girls to early marriage, or putting children into labour to increase the family income.

The challenge in many of the countries was how to prioritize stretched resources to deal with the health emergency, provide social and financial support to households to protect them from falling deeper into poverty, becoming more food insecure and vulnerable, and preventing children from dropping out of school. Across the region, families’ levels of resilience and coping mechanisms were tested- this highlighted the need for strong social protection systems.
Positive responses

There were some examples of good social protection measures that were put in place to support the most vulnerable.

In Bhutan the Government identified the 10,000 most vulnerable students and provided them with take-home food rations. The Druk Gyalpo’s Relief Kidu provided support to 16,452 vulnerable people for a total value of BTN 184 million, BTN 7.2 million of which was allocated to children.191

In Pakistan additional funding that specifically aims to support the poor and most vulnerable was made available including a $500 million budget support loan from the Asian Development Bank with part of it specifically for delivering social protection programmes to the poor and vulnerable.192 Existing social protection schemes such as the Benazir Bhutto Income Support Programme (BISP) were extended, essentially being taken over by the Ehsaas Emergency Support Scheme, which was expanded to over 10 million families.193

International assistance specifically to support the education sector was also made available. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has provided education planning grants across the region and accelerated grants to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In Afghanistan the $11 million grant is supporting activities from distributing WASH and hygiene supplies to schools, recruiting and training volunteer teachers, supporting accelerated and remedial classes and supporting public schools to ensure they are ready to reopen and keep students and teachers safe.194

Lessons learned

Pro-poor policy implementation is crucial to compensate for existing poverty levels.

Measures to prevent the virus from spreading had an unequal impact on different sections of society. The pandemic has had far reaching effects across all income groups, but the poorest families have been poorest families have been worse hit. More support will be needed over the coming years to help families rebuild. Failure to do that may increase the risk of more children dropping out or not being able to make the most of their education.

Existing social protection systems were not sufficient or strong enough to reach everybody who needed support. Across South Asia, governments have increased efforts to support the poor. Emergency measures were taken to support many vulnerable families, who were already on the edge of extreme poverty. Economic and social protection measures such as direct cash transfers as well as provision of food and essential items were able to alleviate some of the burden but not all.
Building back better and building resilience
Feedback from countries at the South Asia webinar, on the key challenges they faced in building back better, included:

- Equitable access to devices, the digitalization of schools and financing digitalization
- School infrastructure equipment (buildings and equipment)
- Measurement of learning outcomes when schools are closed
- Establishing effective monitoring systems.

This chapter considers the lessons learned from the pandemic and outlines ways in which the system could build back better in the future to support the improvement of children's education in schools and improve learning outcomes across the region. While the overall broad vision described lays out a common way forward for education, each country would follow a different pathway, taking into account their context and priorities, the capacity of the existing system to reform, and the resources available for education in the short, medium and long term.

4.1 A vision for change

Implementation of the new vision will assist all children to develop capacity for learning, acquire the necessary resilience and curiosity to pursue life-long learning, and prioritize foundational skills. This new way of working needs to recognize and address harmful social norms and provide alternative learning solutions to encompass the likelihood that significant numbers of children will not return to school. This will be a complex undertaking, so each country needs to plan for explicit short-, medium-, and long-term objectives, to show how they are building a new shock-resistant system.

Each government will need to significantly increase the level of funding for basic education as COVID-19 has created a new kind of humanitarian disaster which unless addressed fully could undo decades of investment and especially impact further on the education of vulnerable and marginalized children.

4.2 What has COVID-19 done?

As discussed in Chapter 2, many education systems were failing even before the pandemic, leading to high levels of learning poverty, especially among the most marginalized learners. The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the weaknesses of systems, highlighted strengths and ironically provided a pivotal moment in history to make change. Changing the way education systems work can be seen as a matter of global urgency, particularly in the light of pre-COVID-19 literacy levels across the Asia region and also the expected learning loss for many children as a result of the pandemic. To bring about real change, countries need to start where they are and build from their existing strengths, considering policies and planning through a gender lens, putting provision for the most marginalized at the forefront.

Learning from the pandemic has shown that where there has been a degree of cross-sector collaboration, responses have been the strongest and have minimized the effects. Applying this learning to future education planning means
the vision for building back better needs to be shared and developed through cross-government co-operation, not be the sole responsibility of the Education Ministry. Planning for the future, therefore, needs to involve a wider and deeper level of consultation than ever before, involving teachers, parents, community leaders, children themselves, as well as officials within the system. It needs to be a holistic planning process, as many of the issues which need reform involve ministries and agencies responsible for special education, health, sanitation, nutrition and women and children.

Across the 14 country studies there is such a significant range of different experiences, including the severity of the actual impact of the pandemic and length of school closures. Reduction in learning hours varied dramatically as did the availability of adult support and the reach of technology. Each country needs to review the resilience of their systems and use this review to identify and sequence their priorities, and revisit their Education Sector Plans to integrate school safety measures, better quality distance-learning strategies and concrete plans to reach the most vulnerable and marginalized children. By undertaking this process of review and prioritization, countries can develop mid- to long-term plans based on what can be afforded. The following section sets out the issues that will need to be addressed if a new and more equitable hybrid education system is to emerge.
4.3 A unique opportunity for change

This time provides a unique opportunity for change. The focus needs to shift to marginalized children (including young children, girls and children with disabilities) and to differentiating their needs at different ages and in different contexts. This requires a better understanding of what goes on in the classroom (virtual and face-to-face) and how and when children learn. This includes:

- a supportive classroom culture and positive behavioural expectations;
- the teacher facilitating the lesson, checking for understanding and giving feedback and stimulating critical thinking;
- children being autonomous, encouraged to persevere and socially engage and collaborate.195

The overarching theme for this vision is that the most marginalized children should be at the forefront of all decision making (Figure 26). This will require extra investment, but solutions, developed through an inclusion lens, will enable countries to meet the needs of all groups of children.

If systems are to become more resilient to potential new shocks, they need to begin their investment in human capital earlier. Strengthening data collection systems to make more disaggregated and gender-responsive information available about their marginalized child learners, will enable appropriate teaching and learning materials and support systems to be developed. For example, during COVID-19, Nepal identified different categories of access that learners would have, enabling them to develop provision for a range of circumstances.

Each country will need to consider how to improve early childhood provision, considering how to ensure that all children can access opportunities which enhance their early development and growth. One idea is to establish early childhood centres where young children and their parents can gather for play experiences and also access basic services. As the evidence from the case studies showed, cross-sector collaboration results in more effective child support. This can be seen when local services are combined so that vaccines and feeding programmes are focused, targeting the most in need and delivered at school. Countries will also need to establish or strengthen referral systems to different agencies dealing with health and well-being, disability and protection.

More detailed information is given below on how the model of building back better can be taken forward.
A new vision of what teachers need to be able to do, supported by continuing professional development to acquire the skills they need, is essential if future education systems are to be strengthened.

**Investment in teachers**

Teachers are the bedrock of any education system. As schools reopen, teachers will need new skills, better support and motivation to address the deepening challenge. A global framework for countries to take this forward is set out in the World Bank’s Global Platform for Successful Teachers.196

A new vision will be needed to recruit teachers differently on the basis of a new set of competencies and not simply on the basis of traditional qualifications. Countries can learn from the new forms of pre-service training being developed in Ghana where all new teachers will be required to hold a new kind of practical-based degree course which involves learning in the classroom from the start of the course.197 To prepare the teachers of the future to deliver the new hybrid model of education, teacher educators will need to upgrade their skills and the pre-service curriculum will need to adjust to align with the new expectations of teachers in the classroom. This will ensure increased quality of teaching and learning.

Findings from most countries indicate that teachers were not actively included in the early plans for developing remote learning.198 Teachers had to learn fast and obviously some learned faster than others. Research shows that the continued involvement of teachers with their students, during times of school disruption or closure is vital. It instils confidence and trust, providing personal reassurance to individual children, especially the most vulnerable and particularly those with disabilities.

There are many ways in which this has been achieved during the pandemic and can be further enhanced. In all countries many dedicated teachers responded well and quickly to school closures and provided support.

“Research shows that the quality of teachers is a major determinant of children’s learning and well-being… throughout their lives, affecting…other long-term social… outcomes.”199

Teachers need to understand that they have a new leadership role in building back better. They have responsibility for providing continuity of learning and positivity to children who have been affected by the events of the past year in different and sometimes traumatic ways. Teachers should be tasked and supported to work in ways that build student resilience and curiosity. They should be prepared to provide safeguarding and support for children faced with increased hardship, violence and abuse, and assist them to find resources that will help overcome extreme psychosocial issues. Teachers learned a great deal during the pandemic, and those lessons should feed into planning for new teacher training and mentoring interventions to ensure they meet the needs of the teachers on the front line.

What is needed now, is an alignment of pre-service and in-service continuing professional development programmes based on a modified teacher training curriculum. This needs to be reinforced through strengthened school-based mentoring.
Building back better must impact the traditional view of the curriculum. There will, post-COVID-19, need to be a prioritization of the curriculum so that children (particularly young ones) are thoroughly learning the numeracy and literacy skills, that will build the foundation for all other learning.

The new skills that teachers will need include how to:

- facilitate learning and provide a supportive classroom culture based on positive behavioural expectations that reinforce 21st century skills such as teamwork, collaboration, resilience, independence and critical thinking;
- deal with student safeguarding and well-being, and provide support for their emotional issues;
- assess learning (summative and formative) and check for understanding in the classroom and give feedback;
- plan for remediation approaches based on the assessment results and deliver these using differentiated teaching pedagogies;
- use technology to deliver lessons, both in the classroom and remotely.

This will take time to develop but will be well worth the investment.

Curriculum reform

The revised curriculum will need to focus not just on traditional knowledge-based learning outcomes, but additionally on making children resilient, independent learners and concentrate on what is essentially important for each age group, e.g., health and well-being, foundational skills. This should also include the social and emotional skills that build well-being, and a greater awareness of 21st century issues such as climate change and disaster risk reduction.

It was clear from the case studies that some marginalization was created as minority language groups were excluded from remote learning due to a lack of materials in their language. The revised curriculum will need to be inclusive and not just promote national cultural relevance, but the diversity of the students within the country including those with special needs or those speaking minority languages (especially for early years when mother tongue is used).

As part of the strategy to challenge harmful social norms, the revised curriculum should be gender transformative, foster respect for diversity and aim at global citizenship and social cohesion (peace building).

There will need to be clearer communication of learning outcomes and competences to be acquired so that schools, teachers and governments can engage more easily with parents/carers about the objectives of learning for each subject and each grade, with better progression ladders to map the journey of progress for learners. Alongside this, there will need to be regular assessments of learning that provide disaggregated results to track progress.

This is a significant challenge but should start with the early grades and develop incrementally over time.

Alternative learning solutions

The case studies have highlighted that local knowledge and experience is critical to reach all children in the most appropriate way, and that the best solutions have taken place at the local level. This, along with the recognition that learning does not just take place in school, is fundamental to building a new system and has implications for ensuring that each country not only develops framework policies (e.g., blended learning), but delegates responsibility to districts and sub-districts to customize their learning plans to focus on the youngest and most marginalized children in their area.

Developing local learning plans will need to begin at the school level and involve community stakeholders and parents as well as teachers in setting and monitoring targets for their specific school. Schools and local officials will then report the results up the system, increasing results-based accountability. For this to happen successfully, skills will need to be built at community, school and local level to plan, set targets and monitor performance.
“Governments should ensure that girls and women are consulted and can contribute to decisions about school reopening through regular feedback mechanisms, and their engagement in decision-making and planning process.”200

By harnessing the advantages of technology through a hybrid approach, education can become more accessible and equitable, more learner-centred, more flexible and of better quality for all ages of children, regardless of where they live. This will include a mix of face-to-face and distance learning modalities, which are tailored to be appropriate for each learner’s context, which could be online or accessed using low-tech options. The effects of COVID-19 on the way people live, learn and work, has shown that learning can happen anytime, anywhere, and physical schools are not the only place where learning takes place. Schools will still be needed as the pandemic has also highlighted the importance of social contact and that many skills still require face-to-face interactions to be imparted (such as through co-curricular activities). Schools also have important roles to play in providing health and social services.

A phased approach to embedding technology use into education means that countries can plan over time for the changes to ensure that eventually all schools and learners are connected to the internet and all learners have access to devices. By using technology, all children can access high quality content through efficient, engaging, and attractive online learning solutions, which can be used to align formal and non-formal education outcomes, as well as develop technical and vocational competencies. Certification becomes easier with online learning: online validation of learning or competences can help students to become certified over time at their own pace; this can really help with secondary education completion, post-secondary and tertiary education, and with technical and vocation training. When students can complete courses in a modular fashion and validate these in their own time, this gives them more flexibility, enabling them to work at the same time and apply new skills to their job.

COVID-19 has brought the timeline for this shift forward for many countries and made the need for the change more concrete, but it has also shown the opportunities that exist, and that change can happen.

Safe schools

As well as considering alternative learning solutions and centres, a longer-term vision, when funding is available, should include the design of larger classroom spaces and more flexible furniture which will make the environment suitable for a more open learning style.

Schools, like teachers, are an essential part of an education system. They provide focal points in the community, should be places of stability and refuge and at best, give children a sense of routine and normality which promotes well-being. There is an opportunity as schools reopen after the pandemic, to ensure they are safer spaces and in some countries, there are now regulations which insist on improved safety and well-being before they reopen, so that schools themselves are built back better. Many countries are working towards the essential actions included in the WHO checklists such as improving WASH facilities, their use and accessibility and levels of cleanliness as well as ensuring other health protocols within the school are in place for regular handwashing and respiratory etiquette, safe distancing and the use of ‘bubbles’ to keep class groups separate. This also includes infection prevention control measures such as reporting and response procedures and the continuation of essential health services such as school feeding, immunizations, MHPSS, menstrual health management, etc.
Establishing a blended learning strategy

UNICEF’s Remote Learning Advice COVID-19 examines a total of twelve different learning modalities across four learning classifications. As each country develops their blended learning strategy it will be essential to examine these and to determine the nexus between self-learning, teacher-guided learning and home learning modalities. As already mentioned, teachers and their support systems will need to fully understand these modalities and where they will be most effective, and these factors should guide the development of a blended learning strategy. As more schools begin to reopen, countries will need to plan for the continuation of the blended approach they have been using, not just to manage ongoing COVID-19 cases and quarantining that still occur, but as part of the vision of a hybrid approach to education going forward, building on all the lessons they have learned along the way.

Each country needs to move towards a different vision which shows how remote learning of different kinds can augment formal schooling and if conceptualized well, even replace it in extreme circumstances (e.g., pregnancy, domestic violence and abuse and extreme poverty). Grim though it may sound, there will be times of disruption in the future for various reasons, natural disasters, conflict as well as potential new pandemics. Now is the time to consolidate how traditional classroom teaching can be reinforced and augmented by various types of age- and level-appropriate remote learning. Opportunities need to be provided to enable the blended learning strategy to be customized for specific local needs and contexts as COVID-19 has shown a range of solutions are needed.

Building a new monitoring, evaluation and assessment framework for the new vision

This framework will need to operate around a revised curriculum. In the classroom environment, teachers are normally expected to monitor children’s learning progress through formative assessment, whether learning is on track and identify strengths and weaknesses. This allows the teacher to adapt and modify their approaches. In an improved environment, where the focus is on learning, formative assessment will be integrated into teaching, and used to inform planning which is flexible to meet the needs of a diverse class of learners.

Formative assessment will be critical in the aftermath of the pandemic, while learners return to school. This would form a major part of remediation strategies which are designed to help teachers plan their teaching according to the level of the child’s skills and understanding.

Assessing progress on multiple, different learning modalities presents a huge challenge, and has to date yielded few good examples of best practice. However, UNICEF, in partnership with Cambridge Education is producing guidance on how to assess learning against different modalities such as radio, TV, mobile phone, digital and paper. The World Bank is also producing guides on digital assessment. Once finalized, these packs will help countries build a new model for monitoring and evaluation and assessing learning impact.

Outside the classroom, collection of education data will be critical so that there is evidence of what works and where. This should be disaggregated so that marginalized communities and children can be effectively targeted and evidence-based solutions can be found.

Education investment

As set out in Chapter 2, it is going to be extremely hard for governments, faced with the economic downturn created by COVID-19, to increase investment to education. The challenge most countries face, is decreased domestic revenues at a time when there are rising needs in health and education, in particular to fund the response and recovery activities. However, the negative budget shocks imposed by COVID-19 may provide the required impetus and financing to raise the historically low education budgets in some countries towards the 6 per cent of GDP targeted by UNESCO.

This section has set out a vision for the future which would change the way education is managed and delivered so that it reaches more learners, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, with targeted interventions and teaching approaches. The next chapter sets out recommendations for steps that can be taken to work towards this vision which are in line with the context of the region.
05 Recommendations
This section presents recommendations for governments across the region to consider. The recommendations are brought together under the headings from the earlier sections. Where possible short- to medium- and medium- to long-term recommendations are made, yet this distinction will differ depending on the country situation.

As demonstrated through this report and the case studies, there have been some good responses to the pandemic in all countries and there are some examples of excellent initiatives that could be adapted and expanded to other contexts. It is recognized that budgets for investment are constrained, yet it is vital that children and young people are prioritized and so some of the recommendations are ambitious.

5.1 Recommendation 1: Reopen schools and ensure all children can learn safely as soon as possible

National governments need to consider the latest research and analyses on the impact of school closures versus other social distancing measures in their decision making, balancing risk level and broader health and psychosocial costs for pupils. Further support needs to be given to sub-national and school-level actors to develop and implement reopening plans that will keep their staff and learners safe while still enabling learning to continue. Some governments have started to vaccinate their teachers to facilitate this safe return to learning. Cross-sector collaboration at all levels of the system from schools, through all the subnational layers and to Ministries, will be required to cover health, education, social welfare and WASH aspects and provide any necessary support.

There will need to be engagement of high-level cross-sector government officials to increase ringfencing of finance for the completion or improvement of school infrastructure and safe operations in all schools, particularly those that serve the most vulnerable populations. From a health perspective, governments should utilize the WHO checklist on reopening schools to ensure that schools can put in place protective measures. They must ensure that where schools do not have adequate WASH infrastructure, suitable alternative facilities are available and that budgets are prioritized towards those schools with inadequate facilities. Figure 27 shows some of the actions that need to be taken for safe opening of schools.

Feedback from countries at the South Asia webinar, on the interventions requiring the most assistance included:

- Equitable access to devices
- School infrastructure equipment (buildings and equipment)
- Digital skills (students and/or teachers).
There needs to be consideration of how to bring all children back to school including those that were out of school previously and give teachers necessary support. It is recommended that teachers are provided with training to enable them to ensure that children are able to return to learn safely in schools. The training should cover aspects such as safe school operations in the context of COVID-19, well-being and protection for teachers and learners and back to learning, including supporting children with remedial learning, introducing hybrid learning and also putting in place professional learning (and support) networks for teachers.

All children, but especially those who have been unable to learn during the time that schools were closed, will need extra support. From the outset, this support must extend past academic support or catching up on lost learning and include mental health and psychosocial support. Learners’ well-being will need to be assessed. Schools should be ready to respond to reports of violence, sexual abuse and other safe-guarding and protection issues that children may have been victim to during the time the schools were closed.

On learning, reopening plans will need to factor in how to prioritize and streamline the curriculum, how to assess children’s levels, how to make accommodations for disadvantaged learners, for example by allowing pregnant girls to re-enter school and take examinations and how to provide additional tutoring or remedial education to children in need. Plans should encourage teachers to set short-term goals with their pupils so that they do not become discouraged with their rates of progress after a long time out of the classroom. Teachers should try as much as possible to teach children according to their learning level rather than their grade. Schools can investigate the feasibility of working with community members or teaching assistants to provide additional support to children in need. It may also be necessary to recommend that some children repeat the academic year.

Finally, the implementation of reopening plans needs to be monitored. Ministries will need data on compliance with SOPs. Disaggregated data will be needed on the numbers of children returning to school, those who do not return, attendance, levels of learning, assessment of well-being and an indication of support needed to continue learning (see below for more details). In addition, schools and districts should be encouraged to share lessons learned and success stories. This can be done formally through EMIS and their data systems and also informally through social media networks.

If this information could be collected with the existing EMIS, perhaps by updating the data collection form, that would be ideal. However, the EMIS is often linked to the annual school census and data is not collected frequently enough. The challenge then is utilizing complementary software that is approved by Ministries of Education to collect school data at more regular intervals to enable planners to be able to be more responsive, flexible and agile. For this to work, monitoring functions at school level need to be strengthened, and for countries with decentralized education systems, standardized, to try and guarantee the same level of services and support to schools and school staff for the response across a country. This data then needs to be disseminated and used for evidence-based planning and implementing. This will require capacity building, and efforts to present the data in a format that is understandable and immediately relevant for decision makers.

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**FIGURE 27 | WASH / INFECTION PREVENTION CONTROL (IPC) FACILITIES FOR REOPENING SCHOOLS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMMEDIATE</th>
<th>SHORT TERM</th>
<th>LONG TERM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Handwashing with soap (preferred and prioritized option)  
• Use of hand sanitizer where water availability is an issue  
• Use of tippy tap/ improving handwashing with local option  
• Re-locating communal handwashing station  
• Disinfection, provision of detergent and disinfectant, protective gear | • Rehab and maintenance of existing water supply  
• Extension from nearby system  
• Improved storage  
• Improve sanitation, mainly toilet and solid waste management  
• Monitoring - include private schools for adherence to SOP | • Invest in system and institutional strengthening for improved WASH in Schools through public resources and private sector  
• Support the implementation of the approved WASH in School's strategy with the inclusion of WASH/IPC |

School management committee engagement for improved WASH in Schools service provision and monitoring  
Communication for Development (C4D) and Advocacy and Communication (A&C)  
Cross-sector coordination with government departments at all levels
Figure 28 shows how this delivery approach to the use of data can be used to improve decision making and implementation. This approach has been used in several countries including in the Punjab in Pakistan and also in Uganda to overcome historical bottlenecks and make progress in delivering education programmes.

Countries will therefore need to address this gap by integrating monitoring reforms into their national plans, with the short-term priority being to address data monitoring needs for the response and addressing gaps in regularly measuring attendance, compliance of schools with safety SOPs, infrastructure development especially WASH in Schools and learning. The second more long-term priority will be to link different data systems, especially health and education MIS systems, human resource management systems, learning data, household survey data from National Bureau of Statistics, civil registration and any database that captures social protection benefit recipients.

5.2 Recommendation 2:
Use data to identify and reach the most marginalized children

As stated above, many hard-to-reach children were further marginalized during the pandemic and will need additional, targeted support so that they do not fall further behind from their peers. To make targeted costed investments and prioritize strategies, real-time data needs to be collected through continuous comprehensive monitoring. There will need to be specific community surveys and learning assessments to inform planning. Attendance monitoring will be crucial and should feed into EMIS Early Warning Systems, so that children who have dropped out or who are at risk of dropping out are identified and provided with necessary support to prevent this from happening. Monitoring should include data on the school infrastructure particularly the quality of electricity supply and internet connection and the accessibility of different types of technology as countries begin to think about moving to a blended approach to learning.

There is a need to collect data on children’s learning levels, mental health and social and emotional learning to feed into longer-term planning activities. Information about the degree of learning loss is required so that at the classroom level teachers are able to support their learners and at the macro level, policy makers can consider whether adjustments are needed to the curriculum and examinations in the medium term. Teachers are best placed to collect information on pupils and to act on it but may also need support to do that. Aggregated data on what is required can also inform government and development partners on what resources or training packages to develop to support teachers.

Much more needs to be done to support children with disabilities from early childhood onwards. As children return to school, they should be assessed, and the results of the assessment used to plan remedial and catch up programmes when necessary. Countries will need to develop and implement disability-inclusive education programmes in schools and support inclusive schools through inclusive teacher pedagogy, accessible facilities, assistive devices and classroom assistance, as well as revised learning materials and assessment protocols that are adapted and adjusted to the needs of students with disabilities.

All countries will need to review and expand their digital education provision to ensure that they are prepared to provide education to all children in case of future shocks. Governments will need to revisit their short- and long-term education sector plans to include distance-learning strategies. The key to this planning will be to balance short-term investment in low-tech and no-tech distance learning to reach current learners with no access to the internet or connected devices, with long-term investments to connect schools to electricity and internet and all learners with devices and online learning platforms. The plans must set out clear goals and targets in the digitalization agenda that focus on marginalized and vulnerable children. Over time, schools must harness the potential of digital education to provide much greater access to digital learning and to enable it to support the democratization of education rather than a tool for further supporting richer children to get ahead.
Preparation will need to cover training for teachers (and parents) and ability to practice with devices in class time. There needs to be comprehensive mapping across schools to highlight where electricity is available for internet and devices, and then to provide timelines for addressing the gaps. It is unfeasible for governments to make this change alone and so there will need to be dialogues with private sector partners who can be engaged to enhance capacity and support innovation. The government can look carefully at the framework for regulating and monitoring such partnerships.

Learning from Afghanistan and Bangladesh, countries could consider introducing or expanding community-based education programmes in areas with high numbers of marginalized children. These have proven to be a successful way of providing accelerated learning programmes, increasing enrolment of marginalized children, especially girls, and have also been effective for early childhood education and pre-primary years.

5.3 Recommendation 3: Strengthen teaching and teacher support to address existing low levels of learning and help narrow the learning divide

As shown above, it is necessary to support teachers to enable them to facilitate students to become autonomous learners and acquire the 21st century skills that they need to be able to live, learn and thrive. In the short term this will involve supporting teachers with diagnostic assessments, analysis of results and learning gaps with focus on foundational skills in primary, linked to age-related behaviour and cognitive capacity. Teachers will then need to use these assessment results to revise teaching and learning plans to incorporate strategies such as teaching at the right level, multi-grade teaching for small remote schools, and remedial teaching to mitigate learning loss accumulated during school closures. Teachers will also need to be trained on health and safety measures to ensure that everyone is safe to learn.

Teachers need to be trained and supported in assessment for learning so that it becomes integral to every lesson and activity. Often the types of materials developed and sent out during the lockdowns reflected the one-way, rote-learning style of education most dominant in South Asia. Yet, we know that the most successful systems focus on formative assessment and reflection among teachers and learners, such as the multi-level approach used in some provinces in Sri Lanka, which is built on the Activity Based Learning approach used in some states in India. It is recognized that teachers cannot mark assessment activities for all children every class, but they can set activities so that children can see how they are progressing, use a variety of techniques to gauge understanding of the majority of learners and focus attention on those that are more in need. Support to teachers needs to be focused on improving assessment for learning skills and also utilizing digital solutions to do this where they are accessible and affordable.

It is clear that the needs of vulnerable and marginalized children such as those with disabilities, those with minority mother-tongue and other minorities’ needs are more complex than straightforward ‘national’ responses can cater for. Much more contextualization and mobilization of capacity at local levels is needed to generate adequate options for all children. Teachers will need to be trained on gender-responsive and inclusive practices so that they are better able to meet the needs of all the children in the class. Teachers will also need better training to identify children with disabilities. Integration of formative assessment into classroom processes will enable appropriate action to be taken to give the required support to all children. Teachers will need guidance and ongoing support to implement these changes which may be given through local peer learning circles or by utilizing digital platforms such as WhatsApp, WeChat or Viber. This teacher-peer cooperation will be important to develop reflective practice and mutual support for areas that teachers find difficult, such as assessment activities, communication with parents, lesson planning, etc. Videos of classroom practice can be shared to demonstrate different classroom approaches. High-performing teachers at district levels can also work with teachers in their districts to provide mentoring and coaching support.

5.4 Recommendation 4: Provide a package of support to ensure children’s health, nutrition and well-being

An important aspect of pandemic preparedness plans is to define the package of essential health services that need to be resumed, maintained and expanded. For school children this will be both the school health services and wider public health provision including immunization, malaria control, oral health, vision screening, additional support for those with disabilities, etc.
Early and effective access to mental health and psychosocial support is also key to creating sustainable and healthy communities. Therefore, pandemic response plans should address the pathways for the delivery of essential health and social services to pre-school, primary and secondary school children and adolescents, ensuring these are secured. This includes meeting physical as well as mental health and psychosocial needs.

Globally, there have been examples of collaboration among governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in the health response to COVID-19. This same level of collaboration is required to fully assess, cost and develop pandemic preparedness efforts which address the health, welfare and nutrition needs of pre-school and school-aged children, beyond learning needs, to build back better and protect their ongoing development.

Budgets will need to be made available to support essential health services and schools. Community health workers and teachers will need to assess children as they return to school to determine what support they need in terms of their health and well-being. Low-cost effective activities such as deworming and provision of fortified snacks should be implemented as soon as possible particularly in poor disadvantaged areas.

Learners and also teachers, family members and other community members may have experienced severe anxiety; may feel disconnected from learning; or may have other non-academic matters impacting on their ability to learn. To ensure maximum learning and settled attention, it would be helpful to strengthen mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) systems and processes, especially those based in schools, and including providing outreach support to learners and family members outside school, to ensure they are available when needed, so that these matters can be addressed and appropriate support provided.

Equally, other well-being issues of students would need to be considered and support be provided to the extent it is possible to do so, to ensure the whole-person well-being, safety and health of the student, and to strengthen students’ readiness to study effectively. Teachers will need comprehensive training to support their learners in schools. This will need to include psychosocial first aid support training programmes for children and their own well-being. Teachers will need to assess children when they return to school. They should also receive additional or refresher training in identifying children with disabilities; children with possible nutritional deficiencies such as anaemia; and children at risk of violence or harm.

As for other recommendations and interventions, it will also be necessary to collect data, disaggregated where possible, on implementation progress, lessons and successes. This will need to be aggregated to enable planners to focus resources as effectively and equitably as possible.

5.5 Recommendation 5: Provide holistic support for children in early childhood development and pre-primary

There is a wealth of evidence from high- and medium-income countries that investment in early years education offers the highest public and private return on investment, therefore governments must prioritize holistic support for children in early childhood development and pre-primary. In the short to medium term, there needs to be a focus on early years and pre-primary children who in many cases seem to have been absent in the implementation of distance learning plans. Drawing from the Nurturing Care Framework, governments can work through ECD centres and schools to reach parents and caregivers and assess children's health, nutrition and socio-emotional learning levels. There may also need to be assessments of children's cognitive and linguistic development as well as their gross and fine motor skills so that appropriate support can be given. For this age group especially, it will be important to focus on holistic development. Education providers and parents should be discouraged from prioritizing academics above other elements which are more important for children at this age. Children will need holistic support that will provide a good foundation for learning. As part of this, children should be assessed for any disabilities and provided with any necessary support.

In the medium to long term, countries can look at the feasibility of introducing more community-based early years provision (see below). CBE and community-based ECE centres, such as those in Bangladesh can also be used as entry points for parenting sessions which could also support early childhood development in the absence of much formal support. If willing, teachers or other community members could provide interactive sessions to parents on topics such as nutrition, childcare, health and well-being. Evidence from other settings have shown positive results in terms of parental interactions with their children and provision of a wider range of food groups to children.
5.6 Recommendation 6: Expand implementation of pro-poor policies and consider introducing universal child benefit to support the poorest and most vulnerable members of society

As far as possible, governments in the region must ensure that the poorest and most marginalized children do not disproportionately suffer long-term impacts from the pandemic. In the short term, they must prioritize providing social protection measures to the families most in need. This will require multi-sector collaboration between the health, education and social welfare ministries. Children, particularly girls or those with disabilities, that are most at risk of dropping out of school should be prioritized for cash transfers or other support to enable them to keep learning. Households should be surveyed to find out what immediate support they need and what could be done in the future to ensure better preparation in case of any emergency.

As part of these measures, governments can consider introducing an emergency Universal Child Benefit (UCB) which would ensure that families access a minimum level of income support. According to UNICEF, “Analysis across five countries in South Asia indicates that a UCB costing 2 per cent of GDP over six months would provide the recipient population with an average of between 18 and 46 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 expenditures, with particularly high benefits for the poorest members of society. More detailed analysis in Sri Lanka demonstrates that the scheme would more than replace the income losses experienced by many families as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, which is a very positive result.”

The provision of universal public services builds trust in government and increases government revenues. UCBs could bring social cohesion and contribute to peacebuilding in a time of uncertainty, they can also help to break the vicious cycle of low investments in education, low participation in the formal sector, low percentage of tax payers and low domestic revenues, leading to low investments. In Nepal, a steady increase in the scope and amount of social protection benefits over the last twenty years, such as child benefit, pensions, and widow and disability allowances, has increased domestic revenues as a percentage of GDP from around 11 per cent in 2000, to over 25 per cent in 2020 (Figure 29). In comparison, revenues in four other countries in the sub-region, which have not introduced similar programmes (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) have stayed relatively flat during the same period.

![Figure 29: Government Revenues Across Five Countries in South Asia Over Time, Alongside the Main Innovations in Nepal’s Social Protection System](image-url)
In the medium to longer term, governments, particularly those with decentralized systems like Nepal and Pakistan, can look at how to work more collaboratively with local level actors such as NGOs and community members to implement and monitor pro-poor policies. The pandemic has shown that local adaptations need to be made. In contexts where this is possible, these could include support to WASH at schools as mentioned above as well as partnerships with local volunteers to support community-based education initiatives. Community members trained to support learning and well-being of young people have been shown to be effective in communities in Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal. This could be extended to support remedial learning, distance programmes and early years education too. Other countries could learn from their successes and adapt for their own contexts.

5.7 Recommendation 7: Consider the impact of COVID-19 on education funding and look for alternative ways of prioritizing education expenditure to address gaps

Chapter 2 highlights the importance of increasing education funding to get back on track to meet SDG 4 targets. The solution will depend on the context of each country and options are provided in more detail in Chapter 2.

In a context of diminished revenues, sectors compete for public resources: the education sector needs to make the case for higher investments, aiming for 20 per cent of Total Government Spending, or about 6 per cent of GDP, and justify how additional resources are needed to adapt the delivery model of education to a blended approach, able to reach all children whether schools are physically open or closed.

The financial analysis (Chapter 2) presented estimates of the marginal cost increase to the cumulative education budgets needed to reach SDG 4 targets for all countries of South Asia by 2030. To produce those estimates, Cambridge Education, UNESCO and UNICEF collaboratively developed a COVID-19 Financial Shock Model to simulate the impact of the COVID-19 response costs on the budget needs for each country. Since the model was first calibrated and run for three different scenarios (baseline, optimistic and pessimistic), the pandemic has taken a turn for the worse in all countries of South Asia, with the exception of Afghanistan and Bhutan. At the time of writing, all six other countries in the sub-region are experiencing a new wave of infections in 2021, spurring further school closures and negatively affecting the economies of South Asia. It is therefore likely that the financial impacts of the response and recovery packages in education will be closer to the pessimistic scenario, although the variable parameters will differ, than the optimistic or baseline scenario. If that were to be the case, then based on the chosen model specification for this analysis (detailed in Appendix), the marginal education budget shock to the total cumulative education budget needed to reach SDG4 targets (2020 to 2030 cumulative education budget) would range between about 8% for Bhutan, to more than 70% for Bangladesh.

By engaging regularly with partners to use simulation tools, like the Cambridge Education COVID-19 Financial Shock Model, governments can estimate and update the additional education budget needed to compensate the impacts of school closures and other related costs. This can take into account new and emerging scenarios in the unpredictable context of the pandemic and its evolution. Regularly updating those scenarios would allow for more effective contingency planning, and better adaptability in the face of uncertainty.

If education is to be prioritized for investments in South Asian countries, Ministries of Education will need to justify increasing public finance requests, at a time of decreased domestic revenues. MoEs should have the capacity to demonstrate the cost impact of the response and recovery interventions on the budget needed to keep the country on track to reach its long-term goals. In order to formulate such requests to the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and make the case for significant increases to education, even if this needs to come from debt financing, the arguments will need to be compelling.

Governments will face difficult trade-offs and tough choices in most sectors: it is therefore imperative that MoE present evidence-based arguments for investments in education, and leverage the existing and mounting evidence of the adverse consequences of not doing so. In the case of South Asia, the cost of inaction in education would be difficult to imagine: the financial loss to the economies can be estimated, but the impacts to societies of uncompensated loss of human capital is difficult to predict: a demographic bulge of unskilled youths entering the labour market without the education background or the skills for productive employment, is not just an economic loss for the country, it is also a high risk to peace, social cohesion, and the sustainability of social protection systems.
Conclusion
This chapter summarizes the findings against the three objectives of the situation analysis:

- to assess and estimate the various impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic on the education sector and stakeholders (children, adolescents, teachers, parents, education officials, etc.) in Asia (East, Southeast and South Asia sub-regions);
- to examine policy and financial implications on progress towards achieving SDG 4-Education 2030; and
- to identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors, which can be shared with other countries.

South Asian countries were making progress against SDG education targets before the pandemic, although there were still serious areas of concern around access and quality and it is unlikely that all countries will reach the SDG 4 targets by 2030. Enrolment levels have been climbing since 2000- there has been an increase in the number of girls attending school and a decrease in the dropout rate over the past 20 years. Despite this progress however, there are an estimated, 31.8 million children out of school altogether, the majority of whom are of secondary school age. The current rate of progress in getting out of school children into schools is not enough to reach the SDG target for 2030 for either primary or lower secondary school. Participation of young children in school is increasing but still an average of only 69 per cent of young children in the region have access to pre-primary education. Learning throughout the region was in crisis pre-pandemic with an average of 58 per cent of children unable to read an age-appropriate text by the age of ten. This, despite all Education Sector Plans or national education priorities having a strong quality pillar, outlining how the country should address low learning outcomes.

When countries started responding to the threat of COVID-19 and went into lockdown, it was inevitable that the closure of schools would affect the majority of learners and that learning from home would be a challenging alternative for many students, because of the digital divide, lack of quiet spaces to learn and external pressures on families which negatively affected the amount of time learners were able to study. Apart from this there were additional effects of the pandemic which will also have long-term consequences. At a time when household finances decreased, making food less available, health services such as school feeding, which became more imperative were reduced due to school closures. Referral services and helplines saw an increase in calls across the region and levels of anxiety increased. All this put pressures on health services whose resources were already stretched through managing the pandemic. As a result of this it is likely that when all children return to school, in some countries after almost a year away, the number of children dropping out will have increased and learning levels will have decreased further affecting the progress of the region towards achieving the SDG 4 targets. Countries who were not on track to achieve them before the pandemic and will find themselves even further behind a year later.

There is a very serious risk that the learning loss as a consequence of school closures and lack of access to remote learning materials will undermine the cognitive capital of countries going forward. The extent to which this is the case much depends on the reach and quality of responses to mitigate learning loss. Developing remediation measures to prevent further learning loss will require significant technical support and financial investment in the education sector. However, it is likely that the overall budget for education will be reduced as many countries have seen their economies shrink.

The key recommendations from the South Asia subregional report are:

1. Reopen schools and ensure all children can learn safely as soon as possible
2. Use data to identify and reach the most marginalized children
3. Strengthen teaching and teacher support to address existing low levels of learning and help narrow the learning divide
4. Provide a package of support to ensure children’s health, nutrition and well-being
5. Provide holistic support for children in early childhood development and preprimary
6. Expand implementation of pro-poor policies and consider introducing universal child benefit to support the poorest and most vulnerable members of society
7. Consider the impact of COVID-19 on education funding and look for alternative ways of prioritizing education expenditure to address gaps
Furthermore, funds have been diverted to other sectors such as health and support from other countries will be reduced because of pressures on their own budgets.

South Asia is faced by two-fold challenges in raising the additional funds needed to address the effects of COVID-19 on education systems that were already off-track to meet the SDG 4 goals. Raising funds internally will be limited by the depressed macroeconomic forecast for most countries in the sub-region, which will have a knock-on effect on the potential to raise additional funds through additional taxation. Improving the efficiency of taxation systems for some countries would be a difficult but viable solution.

Raising funds externally through debt financing is a challenging option for most of the countries in the sub-region and even though many countries can access Official Development Assistance (ODA), the amount that could be raised from this would be insufficient to address the shortfall of the financial impact of COVID-19 and it may (due to conflicting priorities of donors) result in increased inefficiencies.

By engaging with tools such as the model described in Chapter 2 and further detailed in Appendix, governments can develop evidence-based financial simulations that can provide the planning information needed to advocate for increased funding for education.

Within this situation analysis, with model specifications and assumptions described in Appendix, the estimated marginal increase to the projected cumulative education budgets needed from 2020 to 2030 to reach SDG 4 targets in South Asia, varies significantly from country to country. Depending on a “baseline,” “optimistic” or “pessimistic” scenario of the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, countries could experience an education budget shock equivalent to between 4 per cent to 8 per cent for Bhutan, or between 44 per cent to 71 per cent for Bangladesh.

Despite this, different countries in the region responded to the crisis with many innovative approaches which can be shared, learned from and applied in other countries. The overall response however has been mixed in terms of reach and quality and there is little knowledge about levels of participation or learning. Marginalized children, the young and those with disabilities have been particularly disadvantaged during the pandemic despite the diverse range of learning provision and support. Some of the lessons learned during the pandemic included:

- The strength of cross-sector collaboration between health and education at all levels enabled a comprehensive response and communication of messages to support safe school reopening. Where there were approaches which were designed and implemented by local actors, including NGOs, the needs of the most marginalized were better able to be met, although this did not ensure participation and learning. Critical gaps in real-time monitoring capacities have been identified and should be addressed as an immediate priority to track implementation of response and recovery plans.

Generally, countries responded quickly to the pandemic, closing schools and developing remote alternatives for learning. However, there were huge gaps in the quality of provision, and the lack of monitoring presented a challenge for countries to reach all children with the response and ascertain levels of participation and learning. For the future, strengthened partnerships with the NGO and private sectors and cross sectoral collaboration are essential for comprehensive provision.

This crisis has presented some positive opportunities for change. It has forced countries to deliver more quickly on promises of putting adequate WASH in schools; promises of addressing the holistic needs of children better; and presents a chance to work collaboratively towards more resilient, more inclusive, more gender-transformative education, which is free, flexible and accessible to all. Building back better will require a range of actions, including development of policies and plans which are focused on the most marginalized, allocating sufficient funding for pre-primary education, seeking alternative learning solutions, recognizing the importance of formative assessment and curriculum revisions which prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy, MHPSS and encourages the development of skills including critical thinking and independent learning.
A.1 Methodology to estimate the financial impacts of COVID-19 on education sectors

To estimate the marginal impact of COVID-19 on education sector budgets through to 2030, when SDG 4 is hoped to be achieved, we developed an interactive Excel modelling tool called the ‘COVID-19 Shock Model’. In contrast to the World Bank’s 2021 micro-model, this is a macrosimulation model – similar to that applied in the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report – is designed to estimate scenarios for education budgets. The budget baselines for the model are set according to the pre-COVID-19 education budgets to achieve the SDG 4 targets by 2030, as generated by the UNESCO Education Costing Model 2020 for Asia and the Pacific Region.

The main purpose of the UNESCO Model is to estimate the costs to achieve SDG 4 targets in the Asia-Pacific region, specifically SDG 4 targets 4.1 (universal primary and secondary education), 4.2 (universal pre-primary education) and 4.5 (gender equality and inclusion). Like our model, the UNESCO model also aims to be an interactive advocacy and capacity development tool to support countries to understand and meet the financial commitment to achieve SDG 4. The UNESCO model forms an ideal basis for this exercise given that it includes all of the necessary education-related and macroeconomic variables, such as GDP levels and long-term growth rates. The UNESCO model works from the pre-existing standards within the education sector to estimate the budget needs to achieve SDG 4, applying demographic changes and user-defined changes in school enrollment, completion rates, learner-teacher ratios, costs to reach marginalized children, and public versus private provision. We apply the ‘Base Test’ scenario within the UNESCO model for this exercise, which references countries actual outcomes in 2019 and then estimates budget needs according to the standard SDG 4 targets and variable levels.

Users can adjust the 2030 targets within the UNESCO model as per the instructions that accompany the model. The results, which may be less or perhaps more ambitious targets for 2030, will automatically pull through into the COVID-19 Shock Model.

Given that the UNESCO model was developed pre-COVID-19, it lacks the following variables that specifically account for the financial impacts of COVID-19: rolling school closures; shifts in teaching modalities; social distancing protocols; procurement of hygiene products and personal protective equipment; teacher training and support programmes; and expedited infrastructure (WASH) programmes. The modelling results therefore indicate just the increased financing gap due to COVID-19 to achieve SDG 4 by 2030. The model attributes this financing shock to specific services, which are disaggregated according to existing and new services (for example, remediation is an extension of existing services but the procurement of personal protective equipment for teachers is a new service). To help inform financing decisions, the results are also presented according to functional and economic classifications.

There is still a high degree of uncertainty about the pandemic. First, the outbreaks and resultant disruptions caused by COVID-19 are unpredictable. Second, the effectiveness and rollout (specifically to developing countries) of vaccines is still to be determined. Third, there are ongoing data collection and validation exercises that continuously improve our understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on the education sector. As such, the model is designed so that the financing scenarios are flexible. Users can interact with each variable, either specifying the parameters based on: updated/verified data; an assumed baseline with stress tests; or a likely range. Given this functionality, although the parameters for the variables were fixed for this study, users can reapply the tool to effect any required changes. The financial scenarios presented below are therefore indicative of the potential magnitude of the impact of COVID-19 on education budgets.

Annex. Financial Analysis Methodology
The model obviously has its limitations. First, in order to remain both user-friendly and transparent the model relies on a limited number of variables. Although care was taken to select a comprehensive set of key variables, there may be some financial implications of COVID-19 that have been omitted. In this event, users should regard the results as a base for the financial impacts of COVID-19 from which to add the impact of missing variables. This point likely explains many of the estimation differences between this and other models. Second, the model is intended to approximately quantify the long-term budget needs to maintain progress towards SDG 4 by 2030 and therein guide investment cases. Hence, the model does not lend itself to in-year budget/programme planning. Third, the model’s focus is limited to pre-primary, primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary education. This resulted in omissions to the SDG 4 targets related to tertiary education, skills for work, adult literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship, and scholarships.

A.2 Financial impact estimation procedure

The diagram shown in Figure 30 provides a schematic for the model. The white boxes list all of the variables, which users are able to set, and the blue boxes explain the calculation method. Users can reset and adjust all of the variables in the Excel model, simply by inputting the desired values. The calculations to estimate the financial impacts of the specified scenarios are all automated in the model. The following four cost categories are considered in the model:

Remediation costs

The remediation costs account for the days of lost learning, through both full and partial school closures, that must be caught up. The lost teaching days are adjusted to account for the percentage of learners who were effectively reached during school closures by alternative teaching modalities, such as online classes. The net number of lost teaching days is then multiplied by a setback factor, which accounts for skills depreciation among students due to disruptions in teaching continuity (for example, students may forget some acquired knowledge and thus 1.25 school days are required to catchup every lost school day). The final step is to deduct the proportion of lost teaching days that can be caught up within the existing resource allocations, via increased class time through shorter school holidays or extensions to the duration of school days. The cost to remediate the resultant total number of lost teaching days is calculated by multiplying the number of lost teaching days as a proportion of total teaching days within that calendar year by the respective annual education budget.

Example: Suppose Country X had 25 days of full school closures, that affected all students. If 50 per cent of students were effectively reached by alternative teaching methods during the closures then 25 days of lost school must still be caught up for 50 per cent of the students. Because these students were out of school for an extended period, they might have also lost/forgotten some of the learning they acquired before the school closure. Assuming a setback factor of 1.25, then 31.25 (25 x 1.25) school days must be caught up for these 50 per cent of students. However, some of these 31.25 school days could be caught up through extending the length of the school days or shorter school holidays. The remaining number of school days is what must be added to the existing programme to remediate lost learning.

Student enrolment and placement costs

The student enrolment and placement costs account for two important trends related to COVID-19 that exert financial pressure on public education systems:

- The first trend is for additional students to drop out of school, notably vulnerable children from poor households and marginalized groups. These additional dropouts are due to the income shock channel, wherein households have less disposable income for out-of-pocket education expenses (like transport) and other household consumption. This places pressure on households to seek additional income, which can lead households to take children out of school to perform income-generating activities or household duties to free up the time of other household members to earn an income. Given the vulnerable status of many of these children, there is a cost premium to re-enrol them in terms of reaching them, communicating with their guardians to allow them to attend school, and then keeping them in school.

- The second trend is for students to shift between private and public schools. This is especially noticeable in countries with a high proportion of low-fee private schools. Income shocks are the main reason for students to shift from private to public schools. The supply of private schools is also falling in many countries due to the reduced number of households that can afford private schooling in combination with
higher operating costs associated with COVID-19. While it is most likely that children will be shifting from private back to public schools as a result of the opposite trend, the main reason for students to shift from public to private schools is to try and avoid more rigid public school closure policies. The net change in students attending public schools is multiplied by the unit cost per student.

**School and teacher management costs**

The school and teacher management costs are disaggregated according to whether the responses are once-off or recur until the end of the pandemic. The health and hygiene responses are critical to ensure the safe reopening of schools.

- The once-off responses cover training teachers about how to deliver lessons through distance learning and also COVID-19 awareness, practices, and procedures. The cost is calculated by multiplying the number of teachers by the unit cost for the training.

- The recurring costs are repeated for the forecast duration of the pandemic, and include: social distancing protocols in classrooms; the procurement of personal protective equipment for the teachers; the procurement of hygiene products for students/teachers and monitoring hygiene protocols; teacher support programmes; and school feeding programmes for vulnerable children. The cost of the responses is calculated by multiplying the relevant target group by the respective unit cost and the expected duration of the pandemic.

**Infrastructure costs**

The infrastructure costs also address the safe reopening of schools through provision of WASH facilities. WASH facilities are already included in countries’ 2020-2030 budget plans. However, COVID-19 has raised the need to expedite certain of these investments. The UNESCO model captures an aggregated capital budget, so users must set the proportion of the capital budget comprised by WASH. Users must also set the proportion of the 2020-2030 WASH investment programme that will be completed during the pandemic period. These expedited WASH investments are then subject to the additional years of maintenance, costed as a percentage of the replacement value of the infrastructure.

**FIGURE 30 | SCHEMATIC FOR THE COVID-19 FINANCIAL SHOCK MODEL**

The model includes the functionality to account for shifts in the composition of learning modalities, which forms a critical part of efforts to build back better. As online learning technologies and systems are strengthened, it is expected that an increasing number of students will shift to online learning or at least a hybrid model of classroom and online learning. However, the likely trajectory of this trend is not yet certain for many countries. Moreover, the cost implications of a shift from classroom to online learning are also uncertain given the supplementary investments that are required, for instance in electricity and information and communication technologies. This element of the financial simulations is therefore not considered as part of this report. But once more data are available, users can factor in the potential financial implications of shifts towards online learning systems.

A.3 Financial model specification

The variables and the parameters specified for this study are detailed in Table 9 to Table 12 (below) according to the remediation, student enrolment and placement, school and teacher management, and infrastructure variables. Where possible, the parameters for the variables are specified using either real data or relevant studies. In the absence of these data, we have applied best estimates and undertake sensitivity analysis. As such, the estimated financial impacts of COVID-19 should be interpreted as likely outcomes rather than precise forecasts.

The modelling exercise generates 3 potential scenarios to account for uncertainty: baseline; optimistic; and pessimistic. The baseline scenario applies the most likely value for each variable. The baseline scenario should therefore be viewed as the expected outcome, with the optimistic and pessimistic scenarios providing a range for the potential outcomes. The optimistic scenario parametrizes the variables based on favourable outcomes, wherein COVID-19 has a less severe impact on the education sector. The pessimistic scenario parametrizes the variables based on poor outcomes, wherein COVID-19 has a severe impact on the education sector.

Table 9 presents the modelled parameters for the remediation variables, with each explained as follows:

- All students are assumed to be affected by full school closures, given that these are national policies.
- The Center for Global Development has compiled a description of the school closures enacted by countries. The typical arrangement for partial school closures has been to keep public schools open for the grade levels sitting important exams, which are usually the highest grades of primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school. UNICEF confirmed that 44 per cent of countries based partial school closures on priority grades, with 42 per cent of countries also applying student rotation (which similarly limits the number of grades returning to school).220 As such, it is assumed that the partial school closures affect all students except those in the highest grades of primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school (or an equivalent number of students through grade rotations). The optimistic scenario extends the number of grades that returned to school under partial school closures to five, whereas the number of returning grades is reduced to just one (the highest grade of upper secondary school) in the pessimistic scenario. Follow-up country-level applications of the model can be used to account for the geographic prioritization of school reopening, which has been applied in 13 per cent of countries, by re-estimating the proportion of the student body that returned to school and when based on the specific reopening schedules.
- The effectiveness of remote learning modalities has varied widely across countries and income groups. Research by UNICEF highlights two general facts related to the reach and effectiveness of alternative teaching modalities.210 First, almost all countries implemented digital and/or broadcast remote learning policies. However, many of the ideal pre-conditions for the rapid roll-out of these policies were not in place. Second, at the global and regional levels approximately 70 per cent of students have assets at home (e.g., internet, television, tablet, smartphone, etc.) that allow them to learn remotely through digital or broadcast classes. Of these 70 per cent of students who can access remote learning, the World Bank estimates that the effectiveness of these alternative modalities is only around 40 per cent as many children lack regular access to these assets and have not been prepared/enabled to learn remotely. Applying this supply rate of 70 per cent and effectiveness rate of 40 per cent, only 28 per cent of students are effectively reached by alternative teaching modalities. World Bank simulation models also specify ‘mitigation effectiveness’ (the effectiveness of measures to address lost learning days from school closures) in lower-middle-income countries at 28 per
cent. This figure is increased to 40 per cent in the optimistic scenario as per outcomes in middle-income countries, and proportionally reduced to 16 per cent in the pessimistic scenario.

- Countries have applied a variety of mechanisms to catch up the lost teaching days. The main mechanisms include increased class time, accelerated programmes, and remedial programmes. In terms of the amount of lost learning days caught up using existing resources, the model focuses on increased class time as this extends existing resources within the education system rather than adding new resources to the education system. 26 per cent of low-income countries, 18 per cent of lower-middle-income countries, 10 per cent of upper-middle-income countries, and 6 per cent of high-income countries have attempted to mitigate learning losses through increased class time. Extending school hours by one-hour per day would enable countries to catch up approximately 35 days of lost schooling per annum, depending on the number of school days per annum. Moreover, school holidays could be shortened to catch up further lost school days. For example, Nepal has shortened 2021 school holidays by two months to catch up some of the learning days that were lost in 2020. We assume zero days are caught up through these mechanisms in the pessimistic scenario, 35 days are caught up through longer school days in the baseline scenario, and that 50 days are caught up through longer school days and shorter school holidays in the optimistic scenario.

There are two components to the expected learning loss among students. First, learning will not occur during lost school days (i.e., days that schools are closed and students are not effectively reached via an alternative modality). Second, some already acquired learning is lost or forgotten when students lose their engagement with the education system. Research shows that lengthy interruptions to schooling can lead to a 25 per cent to 30 per cent loss of learning. This estimate was applied in the World Bank simulation model to simulate the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on schooling and learning outcomes. The setback factor, which presents the ratio of lost teaching days to the number of required catchup teaching days, is therefore set at 1:1.25 in the baseline scenario. The setback factor is set at a lower rate of 1:1.1 in the optimistic scenario based on research for Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and proportionally scaled up to 1:1.4 for the pessimistic scenario.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLE</th>
<th>BASELINE</th>
<th>PARAMETERS</th>
<th>OPTIMISTIC</th>
<th>PESSIMISTIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duration of school closures up to February 2021 (days)</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Partial</td>
<td>Full</td>
<td>Partial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% students affected by full school closures</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of grades not affected by partial school closures</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% students effectively reached by alternative teaching modes</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School days caught up through longer hours/shorter holidays</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setback factor (school closure time: learning remediation time)</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10 presents the modelled parameters for the student enrolment and placement variables, with each explained as follows:

The Global Schools Forum conducted a review of the impact of COVID-19 on the non-state education sector in low- and middle-income countries. The findings indicate that many low fee private schools, which are common in many countries in the sub-region, are being forced to close due to the negative financial impact of COVID-19. Initial data from India and Mexico reveal a 20 per cent to 30 per cent reduction in private school enrolment. It is therefore assumed that 20 per cent of students in private schools will shift back to the public schooling system in the baseline scenario. This is reduced to 10 per cent in the optimistic scenario and increased to 30 per cent in the pessimistic scenario. The impact of this variable depends on the prevalence of private school enrolment in each country, which is as high as 50 per cent in India.

Experience from previous crises and economic shocks suggest that not all students will be able to return to school due to financial constraints, pressures to take up employment or household responsibilities, early or forced marriage, fear of resurgence of the virus, and discouragement due to learning loss and learning gaps incurred during the school closures. UNESCO estimates that 2 per cent of children globally and 1.4 per cent of children in South Asia are at risk of dropping out of school due to the shocks caused by COVID-19. The additional student dropout rate is therefore set at 1.4 per cent in the baseline scenario, 2 per cent in the pessimistic scenario, and proportionally lowered to 1 per cent in the optimistic scenario. The model also accounts for the fact that it is more expensive to re-enrol these vulnerable children who have dropped out of school. In line with the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report, the baseline scenario applies a 40 per cent marginal cost premium to attract and retain vulnerable children in the education system. This cost premium is decreased to 30 per cent in the optimistic scenario and increased to 50 per cent in the pessimistic scenario. This premium accounts for interventions to reduce the barriers to school access (nutrition programmes, free uniforms, tuition support, etc.); mother-tongue instruction in regions where children do not speak the majority or school language; remote or mobile schools for hard-to-reach children; health interventions against illness; interventions for children with disabilities; and programmes for children in emergencies.

Table 11 presents the variables and parameters related to school management, with each explained as follows:

- According to UNICEF, 66 per cent of countries provided instruction on how to deliver lessons via distance learning and training on COVID-19 classroom protocols. The model therefore accounts for one-off teaching training. For the baseline scenario we apply a unit cost of $6 based on a study done for Pakistan. This unit cost is proportionally scaled down to $4 in the optimistic scenario and up to $8 in the pessimistic scenario.

- Given that (seemingly) effective vaccines have been produced but are not yet readily available at a global scale, it is assumed that the major COVID-19-related disruptions will ease by the end of 2021. Herd immunity may be reached in specific countries before the end of 2021, but it may also turn out that the virus mutates to evade vaccines and COVID-19 becomes a recurring threat. As such, the pandemic length is set at two years in the baseline scenario, 1.5 years in the optimistic scenario, and three years in the pessimistic scenario. The estimated pandemic length affects the implementation period of the school management variables listed below.

---

**TABLE 10 | STUDENT ENROLMENT AND PLACEMENT VARIABLES AND PARAMETERS APPLIED IN THE MODEL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLE</th>
<th>BASELINE</th>
<th>OPTIMISTIC</th>
<th>PESSIMISTIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students shifting from private to public schools</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional student dropouts</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit cost premium to re-enrol students who have dropped out</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost all countries have prepared health and hygiene guidelines to support safe school reopening, which include social distancing in classrooms. According to UNICEF, 96 per cent of countries reported that policies for the safe reopening of schools included physical distancing. To affect these policies, 33 per cent of countries have already recruited new teachers in order to safely reopen schools. Many countries that did not employ new teachers did so only due to insufficient resources. The social distancing variable is based on the learner-teacher ratios in classrooms, which are set at 20:1 according to UNICEF targets. Because of the inconsistent adherence to social distancing guidelines by countries, either because of policy issues or resource constraints, this variable is included in the financial simulations but presented in the results as part of a set of discretionary ‘new services’.

According to UNICEF, 86 per cent of countries have improved handwashing facilities at schools, 74 per cent have increased cleaning and disinfection of schools, and 48 per cent have improved management of infectious wastes at schools. Based on a costing for the safe reopening of schools in Pakistan, the annual cost for face masks, soap, and sanitizer is approximately $10.6 per student/teacher. An extra annual cost of $1.1 per student/teacher applies for school cleaning and disinfection services. The unit cost is thus set at $11.7 in the baseline scenario, decreased to $8.4 in the optimistic scenario, and increased to $15 in the pessimistic scenario. This variable is also presented in the results as part of the set of discretionary ‘new services’.

According to UNICEF, 43 per cent of countries provided teachers professional, psychological, and emotional support. While this is a common response by governments to stresses placed on teachers by COVID-19, there are various delivery options ranging from peer support groups on social media platforms to more sophisticated programmes that offer professional psychological support to teachers. Given that many countries, including Pakistan, have established very low-cost structured peer-support groups for teachers using free social media platforms the baseline and optimistic scenarios assume zero cost for this service. The pessimistic scenario assumes that teachers require professional psychological support, with one psychologist counselling 40 teachers (one one-hour session per teacher per week) at the same average salary as teachers. The average unit cost therefore varies per country depending on average teacher salaries.

As part of the multidimensional impacts of COVID-19 the model includes school feeding programmes for vulnerable children. This variable is particularly relevant given the prevalence of child malnutrition in the sub-region. The challenge with this variable is that food prices differ across the countries, for example the World Bank estimate that the cost of a recommended diet is 38 per cent higher in Sri Lanka than in Pakistan. However, the World Food Programme report that the median annual cost of a school feeding programme per child in 2020 was $55 in low-income countries and $41 in lower middle-income countries. The baseline scenario applies the higher unit cost of $55 to all children living in households that fall below the poverty line in 2020 (or if no data are available for 2020 then 2015), which is captured in the UNESCO database. The optimistic scenario applies the lower unit cost of $41. The unit cost is proportionally increased to $69 in the pessimistic scenario.

Table 12 presents the variables and parameters related to school water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure, with each explained as follows:

UNICEF noted that almost all countries have identified the importance of hygiene and handwashing in their COVID-19 responses. As such, the model accounts for the costs to complete a portion of the planned 2020-2030 WASH investments within the pandemic period as part of plans to support the safe reopening of schools.
Limited data was available on the proportion of WASH within countries’ capital budgets. The baseline scenario sets WASH as 7.6 per cent of the capital budget based on country data from Nepal. This proportion is decreased to 5 per cent in the optimistic scenario (assuming that more essential WASH infrastructure is already in place) and increased to 10 per cent in the pessimistic scenario (assuming that less essential WASH infrastructure is already in place).

There was also limited information regarding the speed at which countries are expediting their 2020-2030 WASH investment programmes. As such, it was assumed in the baseline scenario that 40 per cent of the 2020-2030 WASH investment programme is achieved within the pandemic period. This assumption is increased to 60 per cent in the optimistic scenario and decreased to 20 per cent in the pessimistic scenario. As with all the variables, users can simply update these parameters within the Excel model once actual data are available to reference.

An additional annual maintenance cost is levied to the expedited WASH infrastructure investments. This annual cost is set at 5 per cent of the replacement cost of the infrastructure for all scenarios.246

| TABLE 11 | SCHOOL MANAGEMENT RELATED COVID-19 SHOCK MODEL VARIABLES AND PARAMETERS |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| **VARIABLE**   | **PARAMETERS** | **BASELINE**  | **OPTIMISTIC** | **PESSIMISTIC** |
| Once-off responses |             |               |               |               |
| Teachers retrained on distance learning and COVID-19 protocols | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Unit cost of teacher training | $6 | $4 | $8 |
| Annual responses |             |               |               |               |
| Estimated pandemic length (years) | 2 | 1.5 | 3 |
| Social distancing preventative measures | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Ideal learner-teacher ratio | 20:1 | 20:1 | 20:1 |
| Hygiene preventative measures | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Annual PPE unit cost per teacher | $11.7 | $8.4 | $15 |
| Annual hygiene product cost per student | $11.7 | $8.4 | $15 |
| Support systems for teachers | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Annual unit cost of teacher support systems | $0 | $0 | Variable |
| Feeding programmes for vulnerable children | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Annual feeding scheme unit cost | $55 | $41 | $69 |


| TABLE 12 | SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE RELATED COVID-19 SHOCK MODEL VARIABLES AND PARAMETERS |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| **VARIABLE**   | **PARAMETER** | **BASELINE**  | **OPTIMISTIC** | **PESSIMISTIC** |
| Expedited WASH investment | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| WASH as a per cent of capital budget | 7.6% | 5% | 1% |
| Percentage of 2030 target achieved within pandemic period | 40% | 60% | 20% |
| Annual maintenance cost (per cent of replacement value) | 5% | 5% | 5% |


144 These challenges cover the period when the schools were closed, how they prepared to reopen safely and how they seek to mitigate the impact of long periods away from the classroom. More detailed information is available in the individual Case Study Reports

145 UNESCO/UNICEF Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the education System Maldives Case Study 2021

146 https://www.unicef.org/documents/building-teachers-confidence-and-capacity-provide-online-learning


148 UNESCO/UNICEF Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the education System Nepal Case Study 2021


150 Based on data from UNICEF-fied household surveys across the region (2020)


152 UNESCO/UNICEF Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the education System Afghanistan, Bhutan, the Maldives and Bangladesh Case Studies 2021

153 Pakistan case study


156 Global-guidance-on-reopening-early-childhood-education-settings.pdf (unicef.org) accessed 24 February 2021

157 covid-and-education-June17-r6.pdf (worldbank.org)

158 UNESCO/UNICEF Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the Education System Bangladesh Case Study 2021

159 UNESCO/UNICEF Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the Education System Bhutan Case Study 2021

160 Email exchange with UNICEF education officer Feb 2021

161 https://www.unicef.org/documents/building-teachers-confidence-and-capacity-provide-online-learning

162 UNESCO/UNICEF Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the education System Sri Lanka Case Study 2021

163 UNESCO/UNICEF Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the education System The Maldives Case Study 2021

164 What Have We Learned? Findings from a survey of ministries of education on national responses to COVID-19 - UNICEF DATA

165 What Have We Learned? Findings from a survey of ministries of education on national responses to COVID-19 - UNICEF DATA

166 https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374730


169 WFP A chance for every school child: WFP School Feeding strategy 2020-2030

170 The Lancet, Impacts of COVID-19 on childhood malnutrition and nutrition-related mortality

171 Impacts of COVID-19 on childhood malnutrition and nutrition-related mortality - The Lancet


173 Lives Upended | UNICEF South Asia

174 The World Bank. Bhutan developed a Comprehensive National Response Plan


176 UNESCO/UNICEF Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the education System Nepal Case Study 2021

177 Ibid

178 Final ERP with budget, MoE (updated August 2020)

179 UNESCO/UNICEF Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the Education System India Case Study 2021

180 Powerpoint Presentation (unicef.org) – Psychosocial Support for Children during COVID-19, A Manual for Parents and Caregivers

181 UNESCO/UNICEF Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the Education System Sri Lanka Case Study 2021

182 South Asia Must Ramp Up COVID-19 Action to Protect People, Revive Economies (worldbank.org) accessed 8 April 2021

183 World Bank Group Poverty data April 2021

184 World Bank Group South Asia poverty data

185 Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty: The effect of new data (worldbank.org)


187 Macro Poverty Outlook for South Asia (worldbank.org) Pakistan, February 2021

188 World Bank poverty and equity Global_POVEQ_SAR.pdf (worldbank.org) accessed on 9 April 2021

189 COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021 (worldbank.org) Oct. 202 accessed on 9 April 2021

190 World Bank Group South Asia poverty data

191 UNICEF/UNESCO Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the Education System Bhutan Case Study 2021

192 DB, Pakistan Sign $2 Million Grant Agreement to Combat COVID-19 through UNICEF - Pakistan | ReliefWeb - February 2021

193 UNICEF/UNESCO Rapid Situational Analysis of Responses to and Effects of COVID-19 on the Education System Pakistan Case Study
Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in South Asia

Sub-regional Report

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