

MEDIA FACTSHEET

Unequal access to remote schooling amid COVID-19 threatens to deepen global learning crisis - An overview of South Asia

NEW YORK, 5 June 2020 – As nearly 1.2 billion¹ schoolchildren remain affected by school closures and as they grapple with the realities of remote learning in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF warns inherent inequalities in access to tools and technology threaten to deepen the global learning crisis. In South Asia, nation-wide school closures continue in all countries, affecting approximately 434 million children and youth.

“Access to the technology and materials needed to continue learning while schools are closed is desperately unequal. Likewise, children with limited learning support at home have almost no means to support their education. Providing a range of learning tools and accelerating access to the internet for every school and every child is critical,” said UNICEF Chief of Education Robert Jenkins. “A learning crisis already existed before COVID-19 hit. We are now looking at an even more divisive and deepening education crisis.”

Latest data on access to remote learning:

Internet

- In 71 countries worldwide, less than half the population has access to the internet. Despite this disparity, 73 per cent of governments out of 127 reporting countries are using online platforms to deliver education while schools remain closed².
- In South Asia, 6/8 countries have introduced government online platforms³.
- UNICEF data from 14 countries revealed that schoolchildren with internet access at home have higher foundational reading skills than children who do not have access.

Television

- Despite disparities in ownership, television is the main channel used by governments to deliver remote learning, with 3 in 4 governments out of 127 reporting countries using television as a source of education for children⁴. More than 90 per cent of countries in Europe and Central Asia use television as a means of delivering remote learning, and 100 per cent of countries in South Asia⁵.⁶
- In 40 out of the 88 countries with data, children living in urban households are at least twice as likely to have a TV than children in rural households. The largest disparities are in sub-Saharan Africa⁷.

¹ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

² <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IRB%202020-10.pdf> P5

³ [UNICEF Global Tracker on the Education Response, May 2020.](#)

⁴ <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IRB%202020-10.pdf> P5

⁵ *UNICEF Global Tracker on the Education Response, May 2020*

⁶ [LACRO Education COVID-19 Response Update #9](#)

⁷ <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IRB%202020-10.pdf> P3

Radio

- Radio is the third most-used platform by governments to deliver education while schools are closed, with 60 per cent of 127 reporting countries using this method⁸. Radio ownership across and within regions varies widely. Only 1 in 5 households in South Asia own a radio, compared to 3 in 4 households in Latin America and the Caribbean⁹. In South Asia, 50% of the countries are now operating educational radio programmes¹⁰.

SMS/Mobile/Social Media

- More than half of countries are using SMS, mobile or social media as an alternate education delivery system, with 74 per cent of reporting countries in Europe and Central Asia using these methods¹¹. Around half of 127 reporting countries are offering printed, take-home resources; and only 11 per cent are offering home visits¹². In South Asia, mobile phones are the most common technology households have access by a wide margin, and 50% of the countries are using SMS, mobile, or social media as a method for continuity of learning; innovative ways to continue learning through mobile include dial-in audio lessons and dissemination of learning activities via SMS.¹³

Electricity

- Vast inequities exist between the richest and the poorest households. Almost all technologies used to deliver education while schools remain closed require electricity. Yet, in the 28 countries with data, only 65 per cent of households from the poorest quintile have electricity, compared to 98 per cent of households from the wealthiest quintile.
- In seven countries including Côte d'Ivoire, Lesotho, Kiribati, Sudan, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania less than 10 per cent of the poorest households have electricity¹⁴.

South Asia regional progress on access to remote learning:

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, education systems in many countries have rapidly transformed to support children with remote learning including:

- **In Afghanistan,**
 - The Ministry of Education considered four platforms including television, radio, home based learning using self-guided paper based material, and small size classes to maximize reach to children from general education, Islamic education, and community-based education.
 - UNICEF largely supported the Ministry of Education at national and sub-national levels to enhance its capacity and equipment to develop video and audio content and air them through national and local TV and radio channels.

⁸ UNICEF Global Tracker on the Education Response, May 2020

⁹ <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IRB%202020-10.pdf> P4

¹⁰ UNICEF Global Tracker on the Education Response, May 2020

¹¹ UNICEF Global Tracker on the Education Response, May 2020

¹² UNICEF Global Tracker on the Education Response, May 2020

¹³ [UNICEF ROSA Guidance on Distance Learning Modalities to Reach All Children during School Closures](#), May 2020

¹⁴ <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IRB%202020-10.pdf> P4

- UNICEF, as the co-lead of the Education in Emergency Working Group, highlighted the need for low-tech education service delivery approaches to reach children previously enrolled in community-based learning spaces in remote and rural areas. The majority of households in these areas do not have access to electricity and consequently television and radio. A taskforce was therefore established, comprising of Education in Emergencies (EiE) partners, to develop self-guided paper-based learning packages for primary grades following the national curriculum in the two national languages (Dari and Pashtu).

UNICEF Afghanistan is supporting three partners to implement the COVID-19 response in high-risk areas reaching 1,062,600 children via TV and radio in the regions most affected by COVID-19¹⁵.

- **In Bangladesh,**

- UNICEF Bangladesh supported the development of the COVID-19 Education Response and Recovery Plan for the for the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) and the Ministry of Education (MoE), in consultation of the Education Local Consultative Group (ELCG).
- UNICEF is supporting and playing a catalytic role, both at national and sub-national level, including in the Rohingya camps, to facilitate and accelerate the education response of 41.89 million children (50% girls)¹⁶. Multiple platforms (television, radio, internet and home-based learning) are being used to maximize reach and engagement of children from General, Madrasah, technical and NFE streams including skills training.
- However, access to televised classes and other remote learning platforms for marginalised children remains a challenge. Only 50.6% of households have access to television (MICS-2019). Community radios and mobile phone messaging have been activated at sub-national level to mobilize parents and community to support learning continuity. Though only 0.6% households have access to radio, many mobile phones can be used to listen to radio and have been used to listen to community radio stations. Around 96% (86.1% of the poorest quintile) of households have access to a mobile phone.
- In the Rohingya camps, where the closure of learning centres in March interrupted the education of over 300,000 children aged 4 to 14, there are restrictions on internet as well as limited access to technology. Burmese Language Instructors from within the Rohingya community undertake regular household visits to coach parents, caregivers and older siblings to support learning using the workbooks and notebooks provided by their learning centre. More than three-quarters of Rohingya children living in 32 camps are studying at home and around 95% of them are using learning materials provided by UNICEF partners and others. A survey conducted by UNICEF and partners from 3-11 May 2020 shows 77 per cent of children are engaged in caregiver led learning at home. Over 90 per cent of caregivers surveyed said their children need activity books and notebooks to support learning at home.

- **In Bhutan,**

- A Ministry of Education's assessment found that about 32,135 children in remote areas do not have any devices or connectivity and has since launched Self Instructional Materials (SIM) on 2 May 2020. Simultaneously, UNICEF supported the printing and distribution of Self-Instructional Material (SIM) to around 18 per cent of children (32,135) not reached by TV lessons.

¹⁵ [\[Update 8\] SAR Education COVID-19 Responses 3 June 2020](#)

¹⁶ [UNICEF Bangladesh COVID-19](#)

- Around 640 children with disabilities also benefitted from TV lessons and SIM, to help ensure that no children were left behind due to COVID-19. SIMs are printed versions of the lessons covered on TV and provide learning activities by class level.¹⁷ The Government of Bhutan will open a Bhutan Broadcasting Service TV channel dedicated solely to learning¹⁸
 - UNICEF Bhutan will be working with the LEGO Foundation as a part of the COVID-19 Responding to the Crisis of Care and Learning project which will include country-specific support to the COVID-19 response²⁰.
- **In India,**
 - UNICEF has been providing support to state governments in developing and implementing response plans to ensure the continuity of learning of children during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - In addition, technical support is being provided at the national level and to 16 state governments for distance/home-based education through various means, including TV, radio and other digital mediums. For example, in the state of Bihar, support has been provided to the state government to develop content for distance/home-based learning of children in grades 6-12, with the lessons telecasted daily on the public television channel covering subjects as per the government curriculum.
 - Online video lessons have also been developed that can be accessed via the Mera Mobile Mera Vidyalaya (My Mobile My School) mobile application. In Maharashtra, UNICEF provided technical support to the state government to develop a Learning from Home Package working with partners. The package was disseminated through WhatsApp groups to education functionaries and teachers, who in turn reach out to parents and children daily.
 - At the same time, UNICEF has been providing support for early childhood education and parenting in the context of COVID-19 and the closure of pre-school centres. Support has been provided for orientation of frontline functionaries and other government stakeholders on risk communication and prevention measures related to COVID-19 using online platforms in eight states and a union territory.
 - In addition, outreach to parents has been supported through various means, including home visits by frontline workers, social media platforms such as WhatsApp, and mobile applications through which parenting tips and activities are being shared.
 - In addition, early childhood education curricula have been translated into weekly or monthly calendars in six states, guiding parents and caregivers on play-based activities they can do with their young children at home.
 - Critical support has also been provided by UNICEF in the area of career guidance. For example, in the states of Rajasthan and Gujarat, career guidance sessions were conducted live on YouTube. Career guidance portals were launched in Jammu and Kashmir, Assam and Maharashtra with UNICEF support, targeting children in classes 9-12.

¹⁷ [\[Update 7\] SAR Education COVID-19 Responses 6 May 2020](#)

¹⁹ [\[Update 8\] SAR Education COVID-19 Responses 3 June 2020](#)

²⁰ [\[Update 8\] SAR Education COVID-19 Responses 3 June 2020](#)

- UNICEF supported CHILDLINE in developing a manual to help parents, caregivers and anyone supporting children to deal with the psychosocial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The manual is activity-based and provides activities for two age groups – ages six to ten and 11 to 19 – and requires minimal supervision or guidance from caregivers²¹.
- **In Nepal,**
 - UNICEF has supported the Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) in developing self-learning materials for pre-primary to grade 3, consisting of a condensed curriculum to allow students to remain at age-appropriate level during the extended school closure, of which nearly 11,000 packs have been printed and distributed to the most marginalised children that have no access to other online or off-line learning materials.
 - Additionally, UNICEF developed a radio programme that has reached over 43,000 children.
 - UNICEF is in the process of initiating a partnership with Open Learning Exchange Nepal that has supported the development of the virtual learning platform to include interactive learning resources that are tailored to the needs of children living with disabilities. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology has formed a taskforce to draft a School Reopening Framework, consisting of the government, World bank, UNICEF, UNESCO and WFP, drawing on the guidelines published for this.
 - **In Pakistan,**
 - UNICEF is supporting the Federal Ministry of Education (MoE) in improving the tele-content for the Kindergarten to Primary grades Tele-School broadcast. In partnership with Federal MoE and ILM Association, UNICEF is piloting an interdisciplinary educational approach to communicate core concepts from multiple viewpoints, in diverse ways. The goal is to shift from subject-oriented, textbook-style lessons to segments that offer deeper, lasting, and transferrable skills using subject matter contextualized to the environment. The new content is planned to be piloted in July 2020.
 - In Sindh, Pakistan, UNICEF worked with Microsoft to launch the Education and Literacy Department Digital Learning Platform to provide teachers and students' free access to Microsoft Office 365. This has reached an estimated 150,787 teachers (47,365 females) and nearly 4.2 million children (including 1.7 million girls).
 - UNICEF has directly supported 71,890 children with alternate learning opportunities including learning worksheets provided to 10,188 students of UNICEF-supported ALP programmes in Sindh.
 - In Balochistan, Pakistan, UNICEF supported the campaign “My Home My school” establishing home learning centres in 11 districts to provide continuity of learning at home to 36,387 children (21,408 boys and 14,979 girls).
 - In Pakistan, approximately 1.43 million people (School Management Committees members and teachers) were reached with COVID-19 prevention information via SMS and other social media platforms²⁷.

²¹ Psychosocial support for children during COVID-19

- **In Sri Lanka,**
 - UNICEF Sri Lanka has supported the development of the draft COVID-19 Education Response Plan for the Ministry of Education (MoE), in consultation with the National Institute of Education (NIE) and the Education cluster partners. With technical and financial support from UNICEF, the MoE conducted a rapid fact-finding assessment through its existing What's App channels and phone-based interviews. This included the collection of remote learning platforms that are being accessed by children. While the preliminary data generated through this assessment has fed into the development of the draft Education Response Plan, the overall data collected is currently being analysed and a brief note is being prepared outlining the methodology, findings and recommendations from the assessment.
 - UNICEF supported the government in ensuring continuous learning for students in primary grades, particularly grade 1 and 2 by providing 665,000 printed home-based learning materials. This project included those in rural and difficult areas who do not have access to other home-based learning opportunities. This will not only help sustain the progress of learning of those affected children, but also support a semblance of routine and normalcy in the home environment, which has known positive psychological impacts on children. This will also help smooth learning recovery after the school re-opening and hence mitigate the risk of future school drop-out and learning gaps.
 - The MoE has activated its web-based learning platforms and has dedicated a public television channel to air educational programmes, mainly targeting the grades that are preparing for public exams. The MOE has sought partnership with private network service providers to ensure free access for students to the web-based platforms. However, children from vulnerable populations do not have the devices to access these continuous learning platforms. Further, in certain provinces, some steps have been taken to address education during the period of school closure, such as passing lessons using WhatsApp channels by teachers, conducting interactive online learning using Zoom, distribution of printed materials etc. However, these efforts need further coordination and robust monitoring systems to ensure that no child is left behind.
 - To support the national efforts on ensuring continuous learning, UNICEF provided 5500 face masks and hand sanitizers to the MoE to protect 3,000 education officials including academics and schoolteachers involved in the content development of the learning materials delivered through the public television.

For additional information, Media Enquiries and Interviews

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