**COVID-19 and the right to education**

**Global challenges**

Education systems around the world have been faced with unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic as the delivery of education massively shifted to distant learning solutions. Often heavily reliant on connectivity, such distance learning solutions have only increased the marginalization of the most vulnerable people, just over half the world has access to Internet. Indeed, while the world was not on track to achieve international commitments to education prior to the pandemic, this crisis has exacerbated preexisting disparities worldwide, with vulnerable students, who are usually more at risk of being discriminated against, at an even higher risk of being left behind.

The pandemic had caused 1.6 billion students and learners to be out of school over night during the peak period. UNESCO projections estimate that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, about 24 million students (from pre-primary to tertiary education) will be at risk of not returning to education institutions in 2020, of which 10.9 million are in primary and secondary levels. The 10.9 million in primary and secondary levels is in addition to the 258 million children and youth of this age who were already out of school prior to the crisis. Specifically, regarding vulnerable groups:

* 11.2 million are girls and young women, with 5.2 million of them being primary and secondary school students.
* The largest share of learners at risk of not returning to school are found in South and West Asia (5.9 million) and sub-Saharan Africa (5.3 million).
* At university level globally, boys are at a greater risk of not returning to school than girls but in primary and secondary education, girls are more at risk.
* Students living in poverty and marginalization and those affected by conflict and migration are hit the hardest.

**Useful links:** [Education: From disruption to recovery](https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse). See notably:

* [Webinars on COVID-19 education response](https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/webinars) (especially the summary articles when available)
* [UNESCO COVID-19 Education issue notes](https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/issuenotes)
* [Adverse consequences of school closures](https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences)

**Concrete country examples of the impact of COVID-19 on the right to education**

* **Nepal:** In Nepal, 8.8 million enrolled learners of all levels were out of school, with all educational institutions closed from 19 March to the end of September.[[1]](#footnote-1) According to information available in April 2020,**[[2]](#footnote-2)** while there is limited evidence from previous health outbreaks in Nepal, experience has found that girls and boys leave school after an extended absence from school. Economic hardships caused by crises and outbreaks are also believed to contributed to increases in early marriages, domestic violence and the disengagement of boys from school as they turn to income-generating activities.
* **Nigeria:** In Nigeria, the Federal Ministry of Education had closed all schools nationwide in early April due to the crisis and only reopened partially around end September.[[3]](#footnote-3) According to information available in April 2020**[[4]](#footnote-4)**, poverty and a lack of information impacts children’s lives, in particular girls living in marginalized communities.The pandemic has placed girls living in contexts with persisting gender discrimination and harmful social norms at greater risk. These risks include exposure to sexual abuse, arranged marriage and unwanted pregnancy, which will have spin-off effects girls’ education. Additionally, girls at home are expected to tend to household chores shifting their attention from education and impacting their academic performance.
* **Afghanistan:** Schools closed on the 14th of March, affecting 10 million learners, and opened partially on the 23rd of August. [[5]](#footnote-5) According to information available in April 2020,**[[6]](#footnote-6)** it was noted that Afghanistan has been in a protracted conflict, with new emergencies evolving within the conflict itself. The country counts approximately 3.7 million out-of-school children, and 60% girls and up to 85% of girls in some provinces are out-of-school. Access to education is challenging due to poverty, a limited number of girls-only schools, a shortage of qualified female teachers, long distances to schools, safety issues on the way to and in schools, and harmful social norms such as early and forced marriage. Continuity of education is another significant problem, with many girls and boys unable to progress from one stage of study to the next largely due to capacity limitations in schools.
* **Eswatini:** According to the GPE’s July blog, due to the pandemic, the government closed schools impacting 350,000 students and nearly 16,000 teachers and “alternative ways of learning are not available to all children: children from the poorest households who don’t have access to technology like TV and radio are excluded from the program, which also only targets students completing classes”. [[7]](#footnote-7)

**Measures taken to ensure the continuity of learning:**

In order to ensure continuity of learning for all while schools where closed, several countries have adopted measures specifically targeting disadvantaged groups.[[8]](#footnote-8)

For instance, **Afghanistan** provided unconditional cash for households with school-age children and provides learning supplies (in-kind and cash assistance). To reach students in isolated areas, **Italy** announced an €85 million package which not only is aimed at supporting distance learning for 8.5 million students but also to improve connectivity in isolated areas. **Peru** uses the online education platform “Aprendo en casa”[[9]](#footnote-9) to develop programmes accessible via television and radio for students in rural areas. The **Republic of Korea** organized online learning and gave additional support to disadvantaged students through customized feedback. They also set up public-private partnership to make content accessible free of charge, digital devices were rented for free to students from low-income families and internet subscription fees were supported. Similarly, in **Lithuania,** the Education Ministry leased 35 000 computers to school children from disadvantages families and in the **Netherlands**, schools have arranged for laptops and Wi-Fi for families who cannot afford the related costs. Additionally, Dutch schools also contact parents when learners are not attending distance-learning activities. In **New Zealand,** two TV channels received funds to broadcast curricular content in English and Maori, in order to ensure that those whose primary language is not the language of instruction could have access to distance learning. Similarly, **Peru**, translated contents into 10 indigenous languages.

The risks girls and women face are accentuated during the pandemic as there is an increase in exposure to sexual abuse, arranged marriage and unwanted pregnancy and further, girls at home are expected to do household chores, all of which have repercussions on girls’ right to education. According to information available in April 2020[[10]](#footnote-10), the following three countries reported on measures targeting girls and women. In its educational response to COVID-19, **Afghanistan** included measures to strengthen SMS and community-based protection mechanisms, the provision of advanced technology devices (tablets and smartphones) which gives ownership to women in the households, community sensitization on girls’ education, support for chaperons to facilitate female staff mobility, and continued compensation for female teachers. **Nepal** recognized the need for additional learning support to the most marginalized, particularly girls, in the form of direct cash transfers and scholarships to help improve and retain their learning. **Nigeria**’s Education Minister called for a national upscaling of UNESCO’s “School Meets Learner” programme, which uses technology to reach out of schoolgirls and women in the northeastern part of the country.

Measures aimed for teachers were also adopted in order to ensure a proper follow up of children at risks such as in **Chad** where the government worked with humanitarian NGOs in refugee camps to raise teachers’ awareness on psycho-social risks, or in **Mexico** where the MOE will deliver special training for teachers to develop an inclusive recovery programme. In **Ontario, Canada**, teachers were offered training and webinars on different topics, including advanced topics such as how to support learners with special needs.

Some States are also paying attention to vulnerable groups regarding the return to school, such as for instance in **Canada** where students with learning difficulties are strongly encouraged to return to class as soon as possible in order to benefit from better education support or in **France** where priority in returning to school is also given to vulnerable children including students with disabilities and students who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out.

Other country examples:

* With support from technical and financial partners, the government of **Eswatini** developed an education contingency plan and established alternative learning methods through TV, radio and newspapers to facilitate continued learning from home.[[11]](#footnote-11) Aside from learning programs that benefitted 63,000 students, mental health and psychosocial program for students is also broadcast weekly on the radio.
* In **Saint Vincent and Grenadine**, on April 2020, the Ministry of Educations stated that it would continue to strengthen its eLearning modalities in order to ensure the continuity of education.[[12]](#footnote-12) An information and learning resources website of the Curriculum Development Unit was available online and lessons were also aired on TV channel and social media platform. Guidelines for the safe opening of schools for the 2020-2021 school year were provided[[13]](#footnote-13) as well as training opportunities for educators and parents in Microsoft T365 and Teams.[[14]](#footnote-14)
* In **Samoa**, online resources were provided for ECE, primary and secondary levels and specific programs were also put in place through TV and Radio.[[15]](#footnote-15)
* In response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, **Sudan** drafted a national Covid19 Response Plan in April 2020, to keep students Safe and Engaged in learning.[[16]](#footnote-16) It includes measures for continuity of learning, student safety, and psychosocial well-being. Some interventions are also related to health, water, sanitation, hygiene, and child welfare.

**International cooperation: Global Education Coalition**

The Global Education Coalition launched by UNESCO, is a platform for collaboration and exchange to protect the right to education during this unprecedented disruption and beyond. It brings together more than [140 members](https://globaleducationcoalition.unesco.org/members) from the UN family, civil society, academia and the private sector to ensure that learning never stops.

Coalition members rally around three flagships, namely [connectivity](https://globaleducationcoalition.unesco.org/home/flagships/connectivity), [teachers](https://globaleducationcoalition.unesco.org/home/flagships/teachers) and [​gender](https://globaleducationcoalition.unesco.org/home/flagships/gender-equality), as well as support specific causes including the [educational recovery](https://en.unesco.org/news/global-education-coalition-members-pledge-support-emergency-response-beirut) following the deadly explosion in Beirut.

Specifically, the Coalition aims to:

* Help countries in mobilizing resources and implementing innovative and context-appropriate solutions to provide education remotely, leveraging hi-tech, low-tech and no-tech approaches
* Seek equitable solutions and universal access
* Ensure coordinated responses and avoid overlapping efforts
* Facilitate the return of students to school when they reopen to avoid an upsurge in dropout rates

**For the impact of COVID-19 on other human rights see:**

* [COVID-19 - Protect human health and dignity, respect universal values](https://en.unesco.org/covid19/socialhumanresponse)
* [Heritage and creativity](https://en.unesco.org/covid19/cultureresponse)

1. Data provided by the UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures, caused by COVID-19: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/covid-19-ed_webinar_3-addressing_the_gender_dimensions_of_school_closures-report-en.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Data provided by the UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures, caused by COVID-19: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/covid-19-ed_webinar_3-addressing_the_gender_dimensions_of_school_closures-report-en.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Data provided by the UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures, caused by COVID-19: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/covid-19-ed_webinar_3-addressing_the_gender_dimensions_of_school_closures-report-en.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/eswatini-online-learning-has-become-new-normal-during-coronavirus>   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The information provided in this section has been collected from the webinars on educational response to COVID-19, available at: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For more information: <https://oecdedutoday.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Peru-Aprendo-en-Casa.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/covid-19-ed_webinar_3-addressing_the_gender_dimensions_of_school_closures-report-en.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/eswatini-online-learning-has-become-new-normal-during-coronavirus>   [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <http://www.gov.vc/images/pdf_documents/Press_Release_Ministry_of_Education_To_Strengthen_Its_E-Learning_Modalities_To_Provide_Home-based_Learning.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <http://education.gov.vc/education/images/Stories/pdf/Recommendations-Comments_presented_to_the_Cabinet_of_Ministers.pdf>  [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <http://education.gov.vc/education/index.php/news/95-training-opportunities-for-educators-and-parents-in-microsoft-365-and-teams>  [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <http://mesc.gov.ws/press-release-plans-and-programmes-for-all-year-levels/>  [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <http://www.moe.gov.sd/moe@pdf/Sudan%20COVID19%20%20Education%20National%20Response%20Plan.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)