

# Keep All My Friends Learning

Education & COVID-19 Policy Briefing



## A Global Education Emergency

**A quality education is critical to children's safety, opportunities and ability to reach their potential. However, education around the world, and the hope that it brings, is facing a generation-defining emergency: COVID-19.**

Every child has the right to a quality education, but the COVID-19 pandemic has obstructed this right on an unprecedented scale. To stem the pandemic, in 2020, schools closed their doors to an estimated 1.6 billion learners globally.<sup>1</sup>

School closures amid the pandemic have compounded the already dire progress on Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) - the global commitment to guaranteeing a quality education for every child. 258 million children were already out of school before the Coronavirus struck, including 130 million girls, and UNESCO has predicted zero progress on reducing this number by 2030 (the deadline for SDG4).<sup>2</sup>

Even when children were in school, prior to COVID-19 many were not learning. An estimated 53% of children in low and middle income countries cannot read proficiently by age 10.<sup>3</sup> The poorest and most marginalised children - girls, refugees, children with disabilities - are also significantly less likely to be in school and learning. Now these children, their learning and their opportunities are bearing the brunt of a global pandemic.

The UK Government made a manifesto commitment to supporting 12 years of quality education for every girl. In the face of COVID-19, urgent action is needed to realise this commitment and guarantee all children their right - reigniting commitments to get every child learning.



## Keep Children Learning

**When schools are forced to close, children need distance learning alternatives that realise their right to quality, inclusive and free education.**

However, UNESCO estimates that at least 500 million children and young people are currently unable to access public educational provision and distance learning alternatives, despite the efforts of countries worldwide to provide remote learning options during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

This is acutely felt by the poorest and most marginalised children who face the most significant barriers to access. The UN notes, "poor households have less secure sources of income and fewer assets [...] to connect to distance learning"<sup>5</sup>. This is compounded by 60% of distance learning alternatives relying on online platforms, despite 465 million children and youth not having access to the internet at home.<sup>6</sup>



**Children require resilient educational provision as countries struggle to reopen schools or are forced to reclose. The UK Government should therefore keep children learning by:**

- a) Prioritising gender-sensitive, inclusive and flexible distance learning in the emergency response while schools are closed
- b) Prioritising and focusing on the poorest and most marginalised children including girls, children with disabilities, internally displaced children and refugees
- c) Recognising the unique and heterogeneous risks that marginalised children face when out of school, especially girls and children with disabilities, and take measures to guarantee their safety
- d) Scaling up its support to non-formal learning, investing in tech, low tech and no tech (not-for-profit) solutions that reach every child, including the most marginalised girls and children with disabilities. Resources could include inclusive take-home materials, interactive radio instruction, education television programming for all ages, online learning, and resources for parents, recognising they cannot fill the gap
- e) Ensuring distance learning materials are gender sensitive and disability inclusive

## Lead A Safe Return To School

**Many learners around the world will not return to school before the end of the year. For some, especially girls, there is a serious risk that they will never re-enter a classroom. This means months, possibly years, of lost learning and closed opportunities. A safe return to school must therefore be prioritised.**

Education has the potential to transform lives, yet 258 million children were denied this

opportunity before Coronavirus and many more now risk being denied their right if they are prevented from returning to school. COVID-19 has laid bare social and economic inequalities worldwide, including in the poorest countries, and failure to return children to school as soon as possible will only exacerbate these inequalities.

This is because, for the world's most marginalised children, school not only builds

opportunities for the future, but is also a place of safety and a centre for life-protecting and life-sustaining resources. For example, in low and middle-income countries, 305 million children are fed at school everyday.<sup>7</sup>



For the most marginalised children, school closures therefore present a significant and urgent danger. For girls, many may never return to school, further entrenching gender gaps in education, increasing the likelihood of child marriage and exploitation, and undermining girls' longer term opportunities.<sup>8</sup> Estimates by the Malala Fund indicate that up to 20 million more girls could be out of school after the pandemic has passed.<sup>9</sup>

The risks are also severe for children with disabilities.

Before COVID-19, over half of children with disabilities were out-of-school at the lower secondary level in low and lower-middle income countries.<sup>10</sup> Now, even more face being denied their right to education, especially as distance learning activities are often not made accessible to children and youth with disabilities. Further, refugee and migrant children face serious risks. On top of serious barriers to learning, children living in crowded refugee camps cannot socially distance: in refugee contexts class sizes can reach upwards

of 120 children.<sup>11</sup>

The substantial threats to children's safety and learning mean that preparations for a safe and urgent return to school must be made. To facilitate this, governments need to implement a range of measures. For example, social distancing, accessible hygiene facilities, interventions targeted at the most marginalised, and back to school campaigns.<sup>12</sup>

### **The UK Government should support a safe return to school by:**

- a) Demonstrating global leadership on education by working with partner countries to ensure all children return to school
- b) Ensuring that schools are safe environments to return to, supporting the provision of risk assessments, gender responsive WASH facilities, accommodations to children with disabilities, and additional classrooms and teachers to facilitate social distancing
- c) Helping keep children in school once they return, minimising dropout through targeted interventions, social protection and inclusive programming

## **Build Back Better**

**The COVID-19 pandemic is unlike any crisis the world has experienced in the last century. However, now more than ever before we have the opportunity to strengthen critical elements of education systems around the world, taking the**

**opportunity to reassess the resilience and stability of our education systems and build back better.**

While unique this century, COVID-19 is unfortunately not likely to be a one-off crisis. Other non-conflict crises, for

example climate change, are likely to lead to an increase in natural disasters and resource depletion, leading to many more children being on the move and possibly out of education.<sup>13</sup>

As the world enters an economic downturn, all children, particularly the most marginalised, face the risk of fewer resources allocated to education systems. On top of fewer domestic resources allocated to education, shrinking aid budgets could mean education systems becoming even more underfunded, leaving the poorest and most marginalised children behind. UNESCO has warned that it may be six years until 2018 levels of education financing are reached again, resulting in lost learning for millions of children.<sup>14</sup> Already,

the UK Government has announced plans to reduce its global aid budget by £2.9 billion.<sup>15</sup>

With the world off-track to achieving SDG4, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the need to strengthen education systems in the face of non-conflict crises clear. To unlock a build back better approach, education systems will need a significant increase in financing: the Global Education Monitoring Report has estimated that an additional \$39 billion more per year between 2015 and

2030 is required in low-middle income countries to achieve one year of universal pre-primary and lower secondary education completion.<sup>16</sup> In a context of declining allocable aid to education,<sup>17</sup> DAC members (and others) must step up with commitments to education ODA that reflect the severity of the education crisis.

The world must use the lessons from the pandemic and build back better, addressing education systems' past weaknesses and ensuring a stronger, more equitable future for all.

### **The UK Government should therefore lead globally on a build back better approach to education by:**

- Ring-fencing education funding in the new FCDO department and increasing the proportion of ODA spent on education to 15%
- Committing to Send My Friend's 7 Core Principles of Education Development in the FCDO's strategies, financing and programming
- Actively supporting a strong replenishment of GPE through an early and ambitious UK pledge and leading bilateral advocacy with other donors
- Ensuring ODA financing is held accountable to delivering results for learning
- Strengthening public education systems and prioritising inclusion in the face of non-conflict crises, addressing past weaknesses and ensuring a stronger, more equitable future for all
- Strengthening the leadership and meaningful participation of children, including the most marginalised, in all decision-making processes to ensure their perspectives are heard and needs are met
- Actively supporting ECW resource mobilisation through bilateral advocacy and by playing an active role in replenishment moments
- Mainstreaming education throughout the FCDO ODA strategy
- Supporting the UN Secretary General's calls for a recovery strategy which keeps us on track toward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

# Core Principles Of Education Development

The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the many facets that constitute education systems. With the closure of schools, the important role that teachers, technology, and accessibility play in children's lives became abundantly clear. For the poorest children, they may not have had the resources necessary to access the same education as their peers. For children with disabilities, their learning could have been halted by inaccessible remote learning activities. And for most children, they were suddenly relying on teachers who had little, if any, training in distance teaching.

At the same time, the pandemic demonstrated – for better or for worse – the important role schools play in children's lives beyond learning. From nutrition to health to child protection, the impacts of school closures had significant consequences for children, beyond just lost learning. Some girls faced gender-based violence in the home, children missed out on school-based meals, and those who use schools to learn the language of their new home were held back from this opportunity. Schools are not just four walls for learning, but a place that brings to life the realisation of the rights of every child.

Within all of this, it has also become clear that education systems around the world are not as resilient as hoped, often unprepared to deal with large scale disruption. As the impacts of climate change are increasingly felt, it is critical that education systems are built to withstand the impacts we know are coming. The Coronavirus pandemic was a test paper for the future – climate change will be a final exam.

Recognising the broad composition of education systems, and the need for resilience building demonstrated by the extensive impact of the pandemic, the new Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) should take a holistic, systems-strengthening approach to recovery. This should reflect **core principles of education development**.

Education development, including in the response to and recovery from COVID-19, should take a **systems approach** that delivers **learning** for all children, in particular those experiencing the highest levels of **poverty**. Development must be **disability and gender responsive, climate resilient**, and recognise the needs of children experiencing **education in emergencies**.



# Seven Core Principles

## 1. Systems approaches

Education development supports holistic systems strengthening, with investment in teachers, domestic resource mobilisation, building quality public education, comprehensive programming to address intersecting inequalities, and thorough future proofing.

## 2. Learning focussed

Education development focuses on addressing the learning crisis, with clear targets for teacher training and CPD, quality teaching and learning, the achievement of education outcomes, and supporting the development of knowledge and skills, inside and outside of the classroom.

## 3. Reaching children in poverty

Children living in poverty, including those most marginalised and disadvantaged, and children who are refugees, are a stated central target of education development programming and policy. Development financing is pro-equity.

## 4. Disability

Systems incorporate all learners in a way that supports the full potential of every child, including children with disabilities.

## 5. Gender responsive

Education recognises the unique needs and challenges faced by girls and takes a gender responsive approach that empowers all learners.

## 6. Climate resilient

Education systems are built with climate change and its impacts – including disaster, displacement, and long-term environmental change – in mind, using past lessons and multi-sectoral approaches to ensure the system and skills developed within it are relevant and sustainable for the future.

## 7. Central to humanitarian action

Quality educational provision is made available quickly, comprehensively, and in a sustainable way to not only address immediate lost learning but also ensure long-term comprehensive recovery that supports all learners during education in emergencies.



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