

## The COVID-19 Pandemic and what it means for education



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Throughout the world, countries have been hit by the unprecedented wave brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has interrupted life as we know it and enforced an abrupt halt to the provision of services worldwide. The provision of education through conventional measures has not been spared, as countries had to close schools in a bid to contain the spread and save the lives of children and teachers. The United Nations (UN) indicates that education has been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic with 1.53 billion learners out of school and 184 country-wide school closures, impacting 87.6% of the world's total enrolled learners. This article explores these school closures and what they could mean in the long-term for our countries if the situation does not change.

While the dangers of letting education continue as if nothing has happened cannot be downplayed, it is imperative to explore other ways and means of ensuring some form of continuity of learning, as the long-term effects of depriving children of teaching and learning for too long can be just as detrimental. According to the UN, the 'pile-on effect' of the global COVID-19 pandemic is that interruptions to education can have long term implications — especially for the most vulnerable. There is a risk of regression for children whose basic, foundational learning (reading, maths, languages, etc.) was not strong to begin with. Millions of children who have already been deprived of their right to education, particularly girls, as is the case in many Sub-Saharan countries, are being more exposed to health and well-being risks (both psychosocial and physical) during COVID-19.

Without access to education, children are more vulnerable and unprotected. As household finances are being strained and parents look for ways to increase them

children are more likely to be exposed to risks like family violence, child labour, forced marriage, trafficking and exploitation.

Children and youth who, more than others, cannot be left without education include the following groups:

- **Girls:** Young and adolescent girls are twice as likely to face greater vulnerabilities such as domestic/gender-based violence when not in school. The risk of teenage pregnancies is higher when girl children are left at home unattended while parents go out to look for ways to continue providing for them.
- **Children and youth with disabilities:** this is the group of people who are left out of most educational programmes even under normal conditions and already, as a result, have lower educational outcomes than their peers.
- **Young people affected by trauma or mental health issues:** Schools and learning centres are places where health-related issues, including mental health and psychosocial support, are detected and addressed, which the most vulnerable students rely on for their wellbeing and development in order to learn.
- **Orphans and vulnerable children:** when schools are open, many orphaned and vulnerable children who otherwise go hungry for days on end, are guaranteed at least one meal a day.

This means that continuing education through alternative learning pathways, as soon as possible, must be a top priority right now, to ensure the interruption to education is as limited as possible. Teachers, parents and caregivers urgently need to be supported, to continue providing teaching and learning, whether through radio programmes, home-schooling, online learning and other innovative approaches.

However, it should also not be forgotten that such interventions can only be beneficial as temporary measures, but in the long-term, considerations have to be made to find ways of getting children back in the classroom, one way or another. Remote learning programmes cannot reach all children as those from rural areas and very impoverished families do not have access to the equipment required. Furthermore, physical school attendance has far-reaching advantages for children's developmental needs. For the most vulnerable children, school attendance is lifesaving. Not only does it provide safety and protection, but it also instils hope for a brighter future.

In conclusion, while the dilemma faced by governments between closing schools to reduce contact and save lives, and keeping them open to allow children to learn cannot be downplayed, the effects of interruptions to education, if not addressed sooner, will not just be a short-term issue. These interruptions can have long-term consequences for children and are likely to deepen inequality between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, all efforts have to be escalated to reopen schools, whilst ensuring the safety of children and teachers.