COVID-19

HOW TO STOP THE PANDEMIC ACCELERATING THE GLOBAL LEARNING CRISIS

Before COVID-19, we were living through a silent crisis: the crisis of global learning. In poorer countries, 90% of children aged ten cannot read and understand a simple sentence.[i] This is worse than it sounds: reading is the passport to learning new skills for a lifetime. COVID-19 is accelerating this well-established trend of wasted human potential.

At the peak of the crisis, 90% of enrolled learners, some 1.6 billion children around the world, had been pushed out of classrooms.[ii iii] Parents and carers have had to cope with a new reality in which their children are home all day.

While some kids may celebrate a shorter school year, for the most vulnerable children, school is a safe haven; a place to receive a nutritious meal and be safe from the threat of violence.

For those whose parents lack the skills and resources to homeschool, the lost learning opportunities will set them back further. When schools do reopen, those that have fallen the furthest behind will struggle to catch up.

"Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today."

- Malcolm X

This will hinder the recovery. Past crises show that five years later, the employment prospects of those with basic levels of education is affected; those with higher education are scarcely affected.[iv] Lost learning could reverberate for decades: after World War II, negative impacts on earnings were felt 40 years later.[v]

With COVID-19 threatening to push an additional 70-100 million people into extreme poverty, education is essential to building the resilience of future generations.[vi] Not only that, but the children of today will be the doctors and public health experts of tomorrow, the most valuable resources in combating an inevitable future pandemic.

World leaders can choose to emerge into a world with even more children wasting their potential, with greater poverty and poorer outcomes for their population. Or they can choose to act now and secure the future of their economies. They must:

- **Develop a unified investment case for education and an advocacy plan** to address the education financing gap in the wake of COVID-19, particularly the impact on learning
- **Ensure education financing is protected:** at least 15% of aid funds and 18% of government budgets should support education
- Develop and execute a plan to get students back in school and recover learning loss
- Expand and improve social protection programs to protect the most vulnerable
- **Provide an emergency stimulus package** through creating 500bn in Special Drawing Rights, providing an immediate debt moratorium and reducing remittance costs to close to 0% for the duration of the pandemic (thereafter, maintain them below 3%)

Key Facts

- In low-income countries, 90% of children aged 10 cannot read or understand a simple sentence.
- High-income countries spend 85 times more on education per student than low-income countries.
- COVID-19 has affected 90% of enrolled learners in 190 countries.
- 600 million people in sub-Saharan Africa lack access to electricity.
- Only 28% of Africans have access to the internet. Just 2% of Somalians have access to the Internet.
- The 2014-16 Ebola outbreak in West Africa resulted in 1,848 hours of lost education.
- Only one in five children pushed out of school during the Ebola epidemic had access to radio education.
- Just 3% of public primary schools in Eritrea have access to basic handwashing facilities.

ACCELERATING EDUCATION INEQUALITIES

Approximately 310 million children rely on daily school meals, which they have no access to during lockdowns.[vii] School closures as a result of COVID-19 affect children from poorer communities disproportionately. Even before COVID-19, government education expenditure favoured the rich, particularly in low-income countries. As economies contract, all forms of education financing will decline - government expenditure, international aid, and household expenditure. This will disproportionately affect the poorest who are most likely to benefit from public education systems.

Internet and technology access means that the rich can continue their education at home, while the poor will lose out on learning. Less than 30% of Africans have access to the Internet; for women, just 23%.[viii] [ix] For the poorest in countries like Ethiopia, just 7% had Internet access in 2016.[x] When schools do reopen - as many are already starting to - crowded classrooms and lack of sanitary facilities are a risk to students' and teachers' health. Not only will the poorest students be the furthest behind, but there will be fewer children walking through the doors as household incomes fall substantially and remittances drop, undoing progress in access to education. What's worse is that children whose parents are less educated, are disadvantaged in their ability to learn from home, further accelerating education inequalities.

Plummeting education finance

Before COVID-19, the education financing gap to create a learning generation was staggering. Education financing in low- and middle-income countries would need to rise from US$1.2 trillion to US$3 trillion annually by 2030.[xi] To achieve this, domestic resources for education in low- and middle-income countries would need to increase from 4% to 5.8% of GDP and the share of education in international aid would need to increase to 15%.[xii] Funding would also need to be spent more equitably: in a sample of low-income countries, the richest households received nearly 4 times the government educational expenditure as the poorest households.[xiii]

With the added burden of COVID-19, the education financing gap for the poorest countries is about to get a lot worse as it is hit with a triple whammy. First, the World Bank forecasts that global gross domestic product (GDP) growth will contract by 5.2% in 2020, making this the worst recession in eight decades.[xiv] Countries that are commodity exporters, like many African countries are, will be at a higher risk. Oil producers in particular are vulnerable to demand shocks and the collapse in oil prices. And for countries at a high risk of debt distress - as two-fifths of low-income countries are - raising domestic revenue will be exceedingly difficult.[xv] In Angola, the oil sector accounts for one-third of GDP and more than 90% of exports, while in Nigeria oil makes up 90% of export earnings and over half of total government revenue.[xvi] [xvii] Both have experienced their currencies decline against the US dollar since the beginning of 2020.

As governments respond to the economic and health impacts of the pandemic, fiscal space for education is likely to decline. After the 2008/09 economic crash, some countries reinstated school fees or froze teacher salaries.[xviii] Already, various governments have indicated that they may cut financing to education as a result: in Nigeria, the budget to the Universal Basic Education Commission, the primary financing facility for federal contributions to basic education, will be cut by nearly half.[xix]

Second, household incomes – which account for 40% of overall education spending in low-income countries – and remittances – which increase education spending by up to a third – are expected to decline sharply as the economic impacts take their toll. [xx] [xxi] Four out of five workers have been unable to work due to lockdowns.[xxii] Remittances are expected to fall by 20% in 2020 alone.[xxiii] This makes the cost of sending a child to school unsustainable.[xxiv] During the Ebola outbreak in 2014-16, household incomes fell by over 60% in

Sierra Leone.[xxv] In low-income countries, reduced incomes from economic shocks led to lower household education spending.[xxvi]

Third, both the volume and proportion of ODA to education are likely to be impacted. Aid volume is likely to fall from the economic impact of the crisis. In the UK, the largest bilateral donor to basic education, the economy is expected to contract by 6.5% in 2020, which could reduce the government's aid commitments by approximately US$1.4 billion.[xxvii] In an environment where ODA to education took seven years to recover from the 2008/09 economic crisis and where, for low-income countries, ODA makes up 12% of overall education financing, this could be detrimental.[xxviii]

COVID-19 will decelerate progress in educational access

At the end of April, seventy-one countries had either begun a phased opening of schools or announced a timeline for when schools will reopen, even amidst concerns of safety in school.[xxix]

But schools in many countries are woefully underprepared to safeguard students from a pandemic. Globally, just 65% of public primary schools have access to basic handwashing facilities.[xxx] This number falls to 10% in Niger and 3% in Eritrea.[xxxi] Classroom sizes in low-income countries are 2.5 times more than the number in high-income countries, so curbing the spread of COVID-19 will be exceedingly difficult.[xxxii]

This threatens to undo substantial progress in educational access. Pre-COVID-19, more children were enrolled in school at all levels of education than ever before, and were staying in school for longer.[xxxiii] Globally, the number of kids out-of-school had dropped by 30%, despite population growth.[xxxiv] Educational access was no longer a universal concern.

No more. During the Ebola epidemic from 2014-16, many parents were concerned with the safety of schools and kept their children at home. As a result, in Liberia, enrollment declined by 14% in the 2014/15 school year.[xxxv] In the most affected areas of Sierra Leone, girls were disproportionately impacted: 16% of girls were less likely to attend school after they reopened, and in some communities, adolescent pregnancy increased by 65%. Female students attributed this to being outside the protective environment provided by schools.[xxxvi] [xxxvii] Education service providers believe that girls are less likely to return to school post-pandemic.[xxxviii]

But there is hope: just two years after the Ebola epidemic, enrollment in Liberia had surpassed pre-Ebola levels due to a concerted effort and strong investment in education. A combination of an active radio campaign encouraging children to return to school, grants that filled income shortfalls in schools, textbook delivery, investment in hygiene packages and learning kits, and strong coordination across the education sector were critical for the recovery of the sector. These are lessons that other countries should heed.[xxxix]

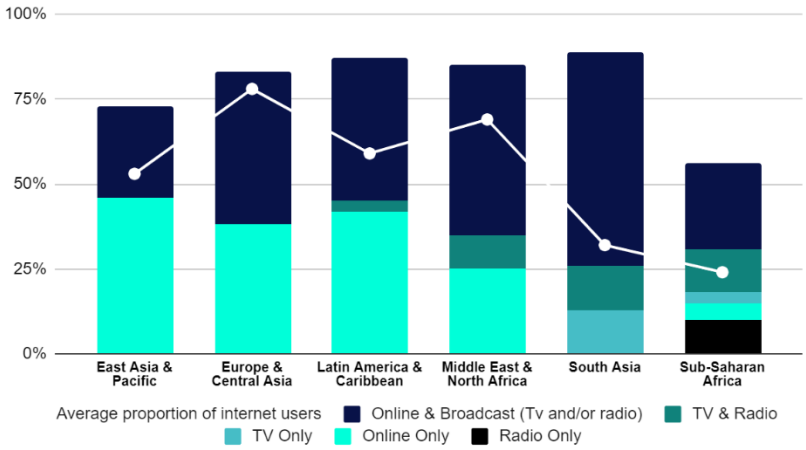
The global learning crisis will get worse

The students that do walk through the doors will have missed out on months of learning. In low-income countries, even before COVID-19, 90% of children aged ten could not read and understand a simple sentence, impacting their entire education trajectory. This will undoubtedly worsen: nearly half of sub-Saharan African countries have no remote learning in place, and, at the end of March, more than 65% had no communication or training for remote teaching. [xl]

To avoid the worst of these impacts, many countries have implemented various forms of educational technology to maintain some continuity of learning. But even here, COVID-19 disproportionately affects the poorest as the shift to remote teaching has exposed a glaring digital divide.

The grand promise of education technology, which is needed more than ever now, cannot live up to its potential of leapfrogging the education divide when it is hamstrung by inequitable access.

Figure 1: Share of countries responding to school closures with different forms of remote learning, by region[xli xlii]



Just 4% of children in sub-Saharan Africa have access to educational technology.[xliii] Electricity only reaches around half of the population in sub-Saharan Africa; with 600 million people lacking access to electricity, sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest energy access rates in the world.[xliv] And although being declared a fundamental right by African governments, less than 30% of Africans have access to the internet; in countries like Somalia, just 2%.[xlv] Education leaders in 75 countries report that the availability of technological infrastructure is the most challenging issue in the COVID response. [xlvi] Teachers are poorly trained in using ICT for teaching: even in OECD nations, just 56% of teachers have received some form of formal training. [xlvii] In addition, the availability of localised developed content is often unavailable. With over 2,000 living languages, the African continent is one of the most linguistically diverse in the world, yet, the English language dominates much of the production of education materials.[xlviii xlix l]

The 2014-16 Ebola outbreak in West Africa shut out roughly 5 million children from schools for nearly 9 months - resulting in 1,848 hours of education being lost.[li] In Sierra Leone, some parents complained that children had forgotten most of the materials that they learned before Ebola, and in Liberia, parents asked teachers to help students with special after school lessons.[lii liii]

This has far-reaching consequences: just three months of lost learning can be compounded further down the line and result in over 1.5 years of schooling loss.[liv] In the US, with a more advanced education system, missing just 10 days of math led to lower test scores, grades, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment. [lv] In Argentina, students who missed out on 90 days of instruction due to teacher strikes were less likely to earn a degree, more likely to be unemployed, and earned up to 3% less. There is also a substantial impact on future earnings that may carry over across generations.[lvi]

Despite these challenges, countries like Sierra Leone are determined to ensure that learning gains are not reversed: they are implementing radio educational broadcasts to reach students without internet access, physically delivering educational materials, and building mobile phone solutions.[lvii] These follow on from the lessons learned during the Ebola outbreak in 2014-16, where Sierra Leone developed radio programming in just three months after schools closed, reaching 20% of formerly enrolled children.[lviii lix] In addition, Benin is providing distance learning through national television and radio.[lx] Somaliland will use grant funding to buy powered solar tablets and record video lessons that will be available for children to access on tablets.[lxi]

But schools must also prepare themselves to catch students up when they do reopen. If done well, a combination of adapting the curriculum to catch children up in the short-term, alongside offering remedial instruction and testing of student levels can actually raise levels of learning for students in the longer-term, so that they are a year ahead than where they would be pre-pandemic.[lxii]

WHAT GOVERNMENTS MUST DO

These challenges are great – but not insurmountable. In fact, innovation and a unified and concerted effort could not only stave off the worst impacts of the virus, but could lay the ground for more fundamental reform to solve the learning crisis. To do this, governments must:

1. **Develop a unified investment case for education and an advocacy plan to address the education financing gap in the wake of COVID-19, particularly the impact on learning:**
   - This should include costing out the impact of COVID-19 on learning globally, the revised financing gap to create a learning generation, and developing a clear investment case to fill it.
   - The advocacy plan should include the Wasted Potential Clock as a critical advocacy tool to highlight the urgency of the global learning crisis.
2. **Ensure education financing is protected:**
   - Donor countries should ensure 15% of ODA goes toward education, as recommended by the Education Commission in filling the financing gap. ODA should also be made more flexible.
   - All governments should meet global thresholds of 4-6% of their GDP and 18-20% of their government expenditure being allocated to education.
   - Financing commitments should be held accountable to delivering results through an education financing tracker.
3. **Develop and execute a plan to get students back in school and recover learning loss[lxiii] including:**
   - Equitable distance learning programs that encompass radio, television programming, and SMS, as well as printed materials, and ensure outreach from school leaders.
   - Engage communities in continued learning and school reopening plans, remove school fees, distribute block grants to schools, reinstate and expand school feeding programs, cover school uniforms and books targeted at vulnerable and marginalized populations.
   - Make schools safe by improving sanitation facilities and issuing social distancing guidelines.
   - Develop remedial programs, modify the school calendar, simplify the curriculum, offer professional development for teachers aimed at teaching at the right level, and offer mental health services.
   - Establish early warning systems to prevent dropouts and assess student levels consistently.
4. **Expand and improve social protection programs to protect the most vulnerable**
   - Expand and improve social protection programs to protect the most vulnerable including cash-based transfers as the primary safety net, which can largely be distributed through contactless solutions.
5. **Provide an emergency stimulus package**
   - The IMF Board should act to create 500bn in Special Drawing Rights and allocate them to poorer countries, providing them with immediate liquidity to respond to the crisis.
   - Bilateral, multilateral, and private lenders should offer a debt moratoriam for 2020 and 2021.
   - Reduce the cost of sending remittances to close to 0% until July 2021 (or until the pandemic ends), and thereafter ensure remittance costs do not exceed 3%

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