

Evidence Paper

# NO EDUCATION, NO PROTECTION

What school closures under COVID-19  
mean for children and young people in  
crisis-affected contexts



**THE ALLIANCE**  
FOR CHILD PROTECTION  
IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION



**Inter-agency  
Network for Education  
in Emergencies**

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# About the Publishers

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The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) is a global open network of members who are working together within a humanitarian and development framework to ensure that all individuals have the right to a quality, safe, relevant, and equitable education. INEE's work is founded on the fundamental right to education.

The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (The Alliance) is a global network of operational agencies, academic institutions, policymakers, donors, and practitioners. It supports the efforts of humanitarian actors to achieve high-quality and effective child protection interventions in all humanitarian contexts. The Alliance achieves this primarily by facilitating inter-agency technical collaboration, including the production of technical standards and tools, on child protection in all humanitarian contexts.

Both networks are actively working together to promote integration and collaboration across education in emergencies and child protection in humanitarian action.

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# Acronyms

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ACPHA	—————	Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action
CEFM	—————	Child, early, and forced marriage
CEPAL	—————	United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
DRC	—————	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EVD	—————	Ebola virus disease
FGM/C	—————	Female genital mutilation/cutting
GBV	—————	Gender-based violence
HIV	—————	Human immunodeficiency virus
HRW	—————	Human Rights Watch
IDP	—————	Internally displaced person
ILO	—————	International Labour Organization
INEE	—————	Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies
INGO	—————	International non-governmental organization
IRC	—————	International Rescue Committee
LGBTQI	—————	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex
LMIC	—————	Low- and middle-income country
MHPSS	—————	Mental health and psychosocial support
MINEDUC	—————	Ministry of Education, Republic of Rwanda
NGO	—————	Non-governmental organization
NRC	—————	Norwegian Refugee Council
OECD	—————	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSS	—————	Psychosocial support
PTSD	—————	Post-traumatic stress disorder
SARS	—————	Severe acute respiratory syndrome
SEL	—————	Social and emotional learning
SGBV	—————	Sexual and gender-based violence
UN	—————	United Nations
UNDP	—————	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	—————	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	—————	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	—————	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOCHA	—————	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
WASH	—————	water, sanitation, and hygiene
WHO	—————	World Health Organization
WFCL	—————	Worst forms of child labor
WFP	—————	World Food Programme

# Executive Summary

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Schools worldwide offer interconnected formal and informal services to children and young people. These services focus not only on academic achievement but on social, emotional, psychological, and physical health and well-being. By providing physical protection and oversight, daily routines, and stability, as well as services for health, nutrition, sanitation, and other more specialized needs, education can both sustain and save lives, particularly in crisis-affected, post-crisis, and refugee-hosting countries. Access to quality education in crisis-affected contexts provides hope for a better future by equipping children and young people with the tools they need to reach their full potential and experience life-long success. With the rapid closure of schools across the world in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, children and young people, especially those in crisis-affected contexts, have lost an important space that offered them stability, even as the environment around them grew ever more uncertain. The economic shocks caused by COVID-19 have had devastating consequences by compounding the poverty and food insecurity many families were already facing, including those in contexts enduring pre-existing challenges. The mental health of adults and children alike has deteriorated as they have been confined to their homes; government and non-government agencies alike have reported a significant increase in violence and other threats that specifically target children and young people.

Drawing from research and experience on previous infectious disease outbreaks and an emergent body of work from the current COVID-19 pandemic, this report highlights the primarily negative effects resulting from the combination of sudden school closures and restricted access to and availability of services, social networks, and other protective facilities for children and young people living in crisis-affected contexts. The consequences of school closures on education and child protection can be categorized into three principal areas.

## LOSS OF LEARNING AND IMPEDIMENTS TO PROVIDING INCLUSIVE, EQUITABLE, QUALITY EDUCATION

School closures are having a significant negative influence on academic attainment and on social and emotional learning (SEL). To mitigate the loss of face-to-face instruction, education stakeholders have attempted to rapidly disseminate **online and other distance learning resources**, including lessons offered on the internet, television, and radio, as well as printed study materials. Analysis of these global efforts has produced several key findings:

- **The content and quality of distance education varies widely**, even within a country, and children's ability to engage in learning depends heavily on the resources and support available in individual households.
- Many learners are struggling to access distance learning options, due to **barriers related to information and communications technology, infrastructure, and digital literacy**.

- **Challenges in access to and the availability of education** have been exacerbated for children and young people living in crisis-affected and post-crisis contexts, as well as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Accessibility for children and young people with disabilities** has been extremely limited across available distance learning platforms, many of which were not designed to be inclusive.
- Other groups of children and young people have also been marginalized; **girls in particular are less able to engage with the distance education offered, due to their household duties.**
- Across contexts, **parental engagement**—including their individual availability, level of education, ability or willingness to support their children’s learning at home while juggling multiple priorities—is a significant factor in the success or failure of remote learning modalities.
- Without daily face-to-face contact with teachers, children and young people lose not only their **teachers’ pedagogical expertise in facilitating participation and engagement with the content**, including SEL, they also lose **dependable routines and protective oversight.**

## NEGATIVE IMPACT ON CHILD WELL-BEING AND HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Schools are hubs for social services beyond academic learning, many of which encourage the enrollment and retention of children and young people who might otherwise be excluded from education. Critical services curtailed or lost due to school closures include the following:

- At the peak of school closures, an estimated **396 million children and young people worldwide lacked access to school-based nutrition and nutritional supplement programs**, which both combat malnutrition and incentivize parents to enroll their children in school, especially girls.
- **Children and young people with disabilities have lost access to specialized or rehabilitative care.** This encompasses differentiated academic support and clinical services, which these children and young people disproportionately require. Outside the schools, such services are out of reach for families living in poverty.
- Children and young people lack access to the formal **mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)** services often provided in schools; integrating these services into the school day prevents stigmatization of those with mental health issues and “normalizes” the healing process, in particular for refugee children and young people.
- School closures mean children and young people have lost important **informal social amenities and safeguards**, many of which are difficult to quantify yet are crucial to ensuring children’s and young people’s well-being and healthy development. Relationships with their peers and teachers can promote positive mental health, and the schools provide entry points into social networks for both pupils and their parents. This is particularly important for marginalized groups, such as lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, and/or intersex (LGBTQI) youth.



## AMPLIFIED CHILD PROTECTION RISKS AND HARMS EXPERIENCED BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Schools aim to provide **physical and emotional security and dependable routines** for children, young people, and their families, especially in crisis-affected nations. During school hours, children are productively occupied, and they are supervised by teachers and school administrators who have **safeguarding** responsibilities. During the lockdowns, the home or community has not been a place of safety for many children and young people, thus the **child protection risks** have multiplied, compounded by growing economic uncertainty, health-related concerns, and other domestic burdens:

- There is growing evidence that dealing with a lack of routine and the structured activity schools provide creates negative feelings among children and young people, including a sense of isolation, all of which have **severe effects on their mental health**, particularly for those with existing MHPSS needs.
- Research across child protection agencies worldwide shows a significant decrease in the availability of social support services, even as hotlines report increasing instances of **sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), child abuse, child labor, and other forms of exploitation and neglect**.
- In situations of armed conflict, the absence of school has deprived children and young people of the incentives that help them avoid enlisting in the armed forces. This creates a heightened risk of the **recruitment and use of children and young people by armed forces and armed groups**, which disproportionately target boys.
- As families suffer pandemic-related economic shocks, children and young people are more vulnerable to engaging in **hazardous and exploitative labor**.
- **Refugee children and young people** are often those most educationally and economically deprived. This includes having limited access to formal education, fewer opportunities for remote learning, and a higher risk of abandoning their education to enter the workplace.
- Evidence suggests that there have been significant setbacks in recent progress toward gender equality, especially for girls, who are more likely to report that household duties prevent them from engaging in remote learning. Confronted with home confinement in a context of economic uncertainty, girls—especially adolescents—are at increased risk of **child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM)** and other forms of SGBV. Moreover, because schools are closed, which limits monitoring and reporting, cases of **female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C)** are on the rise since the start of the pandemic.
- With schools closed, children and young people with disabilities face acute risks. Their need for care at home may put additional stress on parents or caregivers accustomed to the support offered through the schools, and experts warn of increasing **abuse and neglect of children and young people with disabilities**.
- Across all groups, the abuse suffered during school closures will likely have **long-term consequences**: in addition to causing significant mental health issues, sexual abuse can lead to sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and life-threatening complications while giving birth.

In sum, school closures have been shown to have a hugely negative impact on children and young people, immediately and in the long-term.

Looking ahead, the situation for vulnerable children and young people worldwide remains fragile. Before the pandemic, 127 million children and young people of primary and secondary

school age were already out of school. The outbreak of COVID-19 put additional stress on already over-extended and under-resourced education systems around the world. Context-specific risks may prevent or delay the reopening of some schools, in particular those that have been the target of attacks or used as temporary housing during the crisis. However, even as schools reopen, there is the risk that children and young people from some marginalized populations will be **excluded from re-enrollment** or opt out of attending school because they need to work or have been married and/or become pregnant. Others will struggle to re-engage with schooling as they deal with the long-term effects of violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**When confronted with the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and future infectious disease outbreaks or other emergencies, policymakers must ensure that children and young people remain squarely at the center of their decision-making. Before future school closings occur, officials must strive to understand and weigh up the multitude of risks children and young people can and will face, along with the wider public health prerogatives.**

The following key recommendations outline how best to respond to and recover from COVID-19 school closures and to prepare for future shocks:

- Prioritize the **identification of the most marginalized children and young people** in each context, then address the systemic barriers that prevent their engagement with education and access to protective services.
- To prevent children and young people from “falling through the cracks,” **strengthen child protection and education systems and improve collaboration between stakeholders**, prioritizing support for children and young people already out of school.
- As schools reopen, **emphasize outreach to the children and young people from marginalized and less-visible groups**, who are most at risk of not returning or were already out of school.<sup>1</sup>
- As schools reopen, prioritize **access and well-being** over rapid academic catch-up.
- Moving forward, provide **ongoing training and strengthen the capacity of teachers and school administrators**, as well as parents and caregivers, to support children’s and young people with their at-home learning, and their wider MHPSS needs.
- Provide more **equitable remote learning** by strengthening education systems, reviewing existing materials and media, and developing new materials that are appropriate, learner centered, and useful for at-home learning.
- Ensure that scholastic materials and distance learning modalities feature **inclusive options for children and young people with a variety of disabilities**.
- Engage in **ongoing planning and preparedness** for future school closures in emergency situations, including improving water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities, reducing class sizes to accommodate social distancing, and improving resiliency and readiness to shift to distance modalities.
- **Increase predictable financing for education and child protection**, including humanitarian and development aid.

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1 This report does not recommend how to reopen schools safely; for this, governments, local education authorities, and school leadership should follow global guidance provided by the UN at

# 1. Introduction:

## The impulse to close schools

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In early 2020, governments across the globe attempted to mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, by enforcing unprecedented national lockdowns and travel bans. As with other social amenities and spaces, schools were closed to limit the spread of the virus. By April 2020, UNESCO (2020f) estimated that 90% of students worldwide, an estimated 1.6 billion children and young people, were affected by school and university closures. In many countries, the decision to close schools was taken rapidly and reflexively, and without measures in place to ensure that learning could continue or that school resources and services would reach those who needed them most.

The scale and rapidity of decisions to shutter schools have been strongly contested by humanitarian actors. The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies and the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (INEE & ACPHA, 2020) have argued previously that decisions to both close and reopen schools need to balance public health risks with the negative effects on the academic progress and general welfare of children and young people. Schools offer more than academic learning; they also provide stability, routine, and important protective functions. Both the formal and informal services located within schools attend to all aspects of children's and young people's development and well-being. In crisis-affected contexts, much progress has been made in the past two decades to ensure that education is prioritized as a necessary and critical aspect of response in emergency situations, thus the closure of schools and ensuing lack of access to quality education are a setback to efforts to embed education in humanitarian response (INEE, 2010).

For those in crisis-affected contexts, school closures have added layers to existing challenges and humanitarian crises, and the resources of struggling families have been stretched farther than ever. As children and young people were suddenly confined to their homes, parents and caregivers were unprepared to balance full-time schooling and caregiving needs with their other responsibilities. Some coped with widespread job loss, under-employment, and the resulting decrease in household income (ILO, 2020c). In a large-scale survey conducted in 46 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including fragile contexts and those affected by crisis, 77% of households reported losing income since the start of the pandemic, with 30% losing "most" and 19% losing "all" of their income; the loss of jobs and income has been experienced most keenly by women, and by heads of households with disabilities (Loperfido & Burgess, 2020). As they faced increasing poverty, families cut back on the quality and quantity of their food; on top of the 135 million people already suffering from acute hunger, an additional 130 million were expected to be added to that number by the end of 2020 (Anthem, 2020). For parents and other primary caregivers worldwide, then, it is unsurprising that *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*

(“The Intersection of COVID-19,” 2020) reported that COVID-19 would have a “monumental” (p. 1217) impact on mental health and well-being, with ongoing negative effects for children and young people. The article stated that this would compound the impact on those already suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other crisis-related mental health and psychosocial challenges.

Within the current environment of increasing uncertainty, this report examines the effects school closures are having on education and child protection outcomes for children and young people in crisis-affected nations and refugee-hosting LMICs. School closures have clearly impeded academic progress (UNESCO, 2020a) but, perhaps more significantly, they pose an acute risk to children’s and young people’s physical, emotional, and mental health and protection (INEE & ACPHA, 2020). Without the stability of a school environment and access to the accompanying social and government resources, the risks are greatest for children and young people living in crisis-affected contexts who are members of already marginalized groups, such as migrants, refugees, and other forcibly displaced individuals; girls and young women; ethnic and other minorities; young people who are LGBTQI; children and young people who live on the street, have disabilities, and/or are in institutions; children who live in child-headed or single-parent households, and/or in families whose head of household has a disability. Children and young people already out of school—currently estimated at 127 million across crisis-affected countries, or half of all out-of-school children and young people worldwide (INEE, 2020a)—have been pushed even further to the margins. Across the world, amid severe disruption of child protection services (UNICEF, 2020e), organizations have reported a significant increase in calls to hotlines and helplines—a rise of 80% in Venezuela (Save the Children, 2020f), 40% in Sri Lanka (UNICEF, 2020a), and “by the hundreds” in Rwanda (Iliza, 2020). The International Rescue Committee (IRC, 2020a) has warned that additional cases are going unreported; in some conflict-affected nations, home confinement and a lack of privacy may prevent victims and survivors from reporting their abuse.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the emerging evidence and supports the need to address the increasing inequalities and risks marginalized children and young people in crisis-affected contexts are facing due to COVID-19 school closures. From the evidence presented in this report, it is clear that school closures have significantly rolled back progress in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4; namely, to ensure “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” including “complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education” (UNDP, 2015). The evidence presented here provides further support for the argument put forth by INEE and ACPHA (2020): that school closures must be based on contextualized and balanced decision-making that centers on the well-being of children and young people. This report seeks to provide an accessible review that will inform the policy and practice of governments, donors, and the wider community of education and child protection stakeholders as they respond to and recover from the effects of the current pandemic, and in planning to respond to future infectious disease outbreaks.

## 1.1 A BRIEF NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This report was researched and written between October and December 2020. At the time of writing, there was little available peer-reviewed research on the pandemic and related school closures, largely due to the restrictions around social contact and conventional face-to-face research methodologies (Berman, 2020; INEE, 2020b). Research from previous infectious disease outbreaks, such as the 2014-2016 Ebola virus disease (EVD) epidemic in West Africa that triggered extensive school closures and quarantines, provides some empirical data on the impact an epidemic can have on children and young people and identifies particular at-risk groups.

Literature reviewed for the report primarily included existing reporting, needs assessments, briefing papers, and other documentation available in English from international and local media sources, government agencies, and international organizations, supplemented by reports in Spanish, French, and Arabic.

The desk review was complemented by case studies in five contexts: Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Lebanon, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka. For each context, consultations were conducted with three to seven key informants. Informants were recruited via purposive sampling from INEE and ACPHA networks and consisted of representatives working in education and child protection at UN agencies, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs and INGOs), and local civil society organizations.

## 2. School Closures: Obstructing educational quality

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Schools are a focal point for delivering a quality education, which INEE (2010) defines as “affordable, accessible, gender-sensitive and [responsive] to diversity” (p. 122). However, a quality education involves more than just academic learning; it pays attention to all aspects of children’s and young people’s social, emotional, psychological, and physical health and well-being. In crisis-affected contexts, schools provide additional essential services, such as protecting students from physical dangers within the crisis environment, establishing dependable routines and providing stability to support psychosocial recovery, as well as functioning as an entry point for access to health, nutrition, sanitation, and other specialized support services—all of which ultimately contribute to the stability of otherwise uncertain societies. All of these elements interact to underpin and strengthen the learning and social and emotional growth that takes place in the classroom.

INEE (2010, p. 122) lists seven aspects of quality education:

1. A safe and inclusive learner friendly environment
2. Competent, well-trained teachers who are knowledgeable in the subject matter and pedagogy
3. An appropriate, context-specific curriculum that is comprehensible and culturally, linguistically, and socially relevant for the learners
4. Adequate and relevant materials for teaching and learning;
5. Participatory methods of instruction and learning processes that respect the dignity of the learner;
6. Appropriate class sizes and teacher-student ratios; and
7. An emphasis on recreation, play, sport and creative activities in addition to areas such as literacy, numeracy and life skills.

INEE (2010, p. 3) further notes that education provides critical intangible value: “Schools and other learning spaces are often at the heart of the community and symbolize opportunity for future generations and hope for a better life.” For children and young people in crisis-affected contexts, education provides hope for a better future and access to opportunities that may break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. With schools closed, all of these aspects of quality education—the tangible and intangible, formal and informal services—are lost.

## 2.1 LOSS OF ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

As schools around the globe began to close, education authorities worked to provide for just one aspect of the educational experience—academic learning—without giving much attention to the social and emotional engagement the school environment provides. The World Bank (Azevedo et al., 2020) and UNESCO (2020a) have concentrated on the devastating effects school closures have on children's and young people's learning and academic progress. After conducting a survey of education ministries, UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank (2020) found that children each lost an average of 47 days of face-to-face instruction. Emerging data show a concerning effect of lost instruction on the foundational skills of children ages 9-11: out-of-school children were 11%-43% more likely to lose foundational reading skills than those who were still attending classes face-to-face during the pandemic (Conto et al., 2020). Learning losses not only affect a child's or young person's ability to progress through school and reach their full potential, they also have long-term economic consequences. The Inter-American Development Bank (Busso & Munoz, 2020) reported in previous research that adults who were subjected to an 88-day teacher strike as children experienced a subsequent 2.99% reduction in labor market earnings and a decline in their hourly wages as adults.

With schools closed, children and young people lost consistent face-to-face educational engagement. Providing ongoing access to learning is dependent on multiple factors, including the distance modalities offered by the school system, information and communications technology literacy and availability, and parental engagement. In a Save the Children (2020) survey of 31,683 parents and caregivers and 13,477 children and young people aged 11 to 17 in 46 countries, 96% of the adult and child respondents reported that their schools were completely closed, with no face-to-face or remote learning; 2% reported having access to remote learning; and another 2% indicated that face-to-face schooling had continued (Gordon et al., 2020). For many, schooling shifted from formal, sequenced, teacher-led lessons to a highly individualized effort that was dependent on the resources available in each household.

There is great variation across contexts in terms of which learning materials were made available to children and young people, and when. UNICEF reports that, out of 127 countries surveyed, 73% maintained online platforms for education delivery (Dreesen et al., 2020). The quality and nature of these online offerings varied: some involved real-time lessons for discrete class groups (using programs such as Zoom for remote teaching), and some referred learners to a static material repository where they could access worksheets, readings, and website links. The shift many education ministries had to make to online platforms was rapid and haphazard, especially as the widespread lockdowns began in March 2020, which highlights their lack of preparedness for an emergency of this scale. Given the bandwidth burden required for hosting or sending video files, education officials in LMICs relied on television and radio broadcasts to deliver lessons. Moreover, half of the countries surveyed had distributed paper materials to learners (Dreesen et al., 2020). The quality of this content and its suitability for each grade level has not been widely analyzed. The apparent intention of these stopgap measures was to provide some educational content and to engage children and young people in informal and extracurricular learning, but the content was not necessarily aligned with national curricular guidelines.<sup>2</sup>

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2 A full list of distance learning modalities compiled by UNESCO is available at <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/nationalresponses>.

Lost in this approach is the engagement that occurs in the classroom and on the school campus. Making progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 4.7, for example, calls for students to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for their “sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciate of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development” (UNDP, 2015). To acquire such active, embodied forms of knowledge and skill requires interaction and engagement with others. Similarly, informal SEL occurs through classroom and non-classroom interactions. Chabbott and Sinclair (2020) indicate that textbooks, like those used for home study during school closures, are not designed to encourage and promote SEL skills, so this aspect of students’ overall development may also suffer setbacks.

Another significant component of quality education is lost with this isolated and individualized approach to learning: the teachers. Teachers provide a consistent learning experience and are trained to differentiate their instruction to reach a variety of ability levels within the class. In the classroom, teachers interpret learning materials and use them according to their pedagogical expertise and content knowledge, and they encourage the children and young people to participate and engage, with them and with their peers. With the school closures, 67% of respondents from the Save the Children survey reported having no contact with their teachers (Ritz et al., 2020). Without teachers to mediate the use of learning materials, the quality and quantity of children’s and young people’s learning depends heavily on the resources of time, money, and attention available in their homes. For early education and pre-primary students, the loss of contact with teachers and time in the classroom is especially worrying: 90% of brain development takes place before a child’s fifth birthday, thus, the lack of quality pre-primary education, combined with possible harm caused by toxic stress, raises the risk of permanent cognitive impairment (cf. Zubairi & Rose, 2017).

**Technological access divides.** Even though some education systems have offered online platforms, learners in crisis-affected and low-income nations have generally lacked access; in the Save the Children survey, only 2% of respondents across the 46 sample countries had access to online learning options (Ritz et al., 2020). Web-based platforms require that both the learning provider (such as the teacher) and the learner have a consistent power source, a reliable internet connection, and a device for logging onto the internet. They also must have the digital literacy to use those platforms, as well as time and support from a caregiver. These three elements carry significant costs and, as poverty rates rise, they become significant barriers to platform access. Across much of central Africa and South Asia, for example, less than a quarter of the population has consistent internet access (Dreesen et al., 2020); many lack access due to the cost of internet access and data plans (Amnesty International, 2020; UNESCO, 2020g). In the DRC, for example, just 8% of households have internet access (ACAPS, 2020b). Households that do have access may own just one internet-enabled device, and competition for that single internet connection may be a barrier to learning (UNESCO et al., 2020).

Other distance learning modalities such as television and radio offer additional options for continued engagement with learning, yet most marginalized populations have limited access to these technologies. For example, in 2018, 85% of Burundi, Burkina Faso, and Chad lacked consistent access to a power source (UNESCO, 2020c). Because of the lack of electricity, the government and Save the Children have distributed solar-powered ra-



dios to vulnerable families in Rwanda (World Bank, 2020c) and UNICEF have provided batteries for devices in Zimbabwe (Mokwetsi, 2020). Refugee and migrant children and young people in particular, who already may have been excluded from formal education systems in their host country, lack internet capabilities and, thus, access to distance learning opportunities, as reported for Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Colombia (UNESCO, 2020h) and Syrian and Palestinian refugee families in Lebanon (Save the Children, 2020e). From surveys conducted with 1,400 participants from refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) populations and additional surveys in 14 crisis-affected countries, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC, 2020) indicated challenges in accessing remote education. For example, in six provinces of Afghanistan, only 23% of survey participants had access to television, and no participants were aware of the educational channels available. There also are examples of an entire refugee population being purposely prevented from accessing the internet, such as the one million Rohingya refugees living in 34 camps in the Bangladeshi city of Cox's Bazar. The ban on sim cards and mobile services in these camps was instituted in September 2019 by the Bangladeshi government, which cited "security" reasons (McVeigh, 2019). The IRC (2020b) estimated that 300,000 Rohingya refugee children and young people lacked access to remote learning due to the internet ban, further affecting their future prospects and exposing them to increased risk of trafficking, child labor, and CEFM.

There also is evidence that both digital and non-digital offerings lack good accessibility features for children and young people with disabilities (McClain-Nhlapo, 2020). In survey results from Save the Children, 90% of the caregivers of children and young people with disabilities reported encountering obstacles to learning (Gordon et al., 2020), and World Bank (2020c) survey participants noted that education platforms often lack such features as transcripts and closed captions, screen readers, and print magnifiers. In addition, platforms that can be manipulated only with caregiver support were seen as labor intensive. Non-digital offerings provided limited accessibility for learners with sensorial impairments; only 18% of children and young people with hearing impairments were able to access sign language interpretation, and 12% with visual impairments were able to access Braille materials.

Caregivers have attempted to surmount these barriers to access and to cover additional education costs for resources. This often is done through unregulated sources, which may expose them to additional financial distress. In a survey conducted with 1,400 people in eight countries affected by conflict, 41% in both Afghanistan and Colombia indicated that they had borrowed money to cover their expenses, including education-related costs (NRC, 2020). Amnesty International (2020) reported that some Sri Lankan parents had remortgaged their houses or taken out loans at predatory rates so they could pay for the internet access and technology their children needed to continue their schooling during the pandemic.

**Family support for learning at home.** Even children and young people who have access to learning materials often require assistance in using those materials and in maintaining their motivation to learn. In many contexts, lockdowns were expected to be short-term interventions, but as "temporary" became "the new normal," parents' reactions to their increased responsibilities changed. In Rwanda, for example, temporary school closures have ended up lasting for months, and some children and young people there will not be back in the classroom until sometime in 2021. Little research has captured the shift in parental motivation over the course of the lockdown, or how responsibility for learning shifted from teachers to parents and caregivers. A key informant in Rwanda spoke of

the “culture shift” required for children to view the TV or radio as a medium for learning, rather than for entertainment. Younger children put additional demands on parents and caregivers, as they need more support for distance learning, such as supervision and assistance when using and caring for devices, and they may need closer supervision to stay on task, especially when listening to instructions on the radio.

Thus, a significant individual variable for children’s and young people’s learning at home is the support of household members. Caregivers themselves may lack the confidence and skills needed to provide assistance, due to their own lack of literacy or education (Chabbott & Sinclair, 2020) or their lack of comfort with distance learning tools (World Bank, 2020c). Others lack time, due to employment commitments or domestic responsibilities, such as caring for multiple children.

For children and young people in general, and children and young people with disabilities in particular, caregivers are often unable to provide the support their children need to complete their schoolwork, especially caregivers who are balancing work and other parenting duties (Gordon et al., 2020). Children and young people with disabilities again are doubly impacted; as reported above, educational materials are broadly inaccessible for those with disabilities, thus, these students require a caregiver’s help to navigate websites, read texts aloud, or provide sign language interpretation.

Contextual factors also hinder family engagement in learning at home. In Lebanon, especially among refugee families already under strain from the economic crisis, political upheaval, and the August 2020 Beirut blast, parents report being unable to help with their children’s schoolwork (Save the Children, 2020e). Poverty is another decisive factor in the support that children and young people receive: using data from its Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, UNICEF (Mishra et al., 2020) reports that household wealth is a major determinant in whether a child receives support with homework; children and young people from lower income groups receive less support than their wealthier peers. During the EVD school closures in Liberia, there were reports that private tutoring was being given in homes (Rothe, 2014), thus the children and young people whose parents could afford this were able to continue receiving high-quality, teacher-led lessons. Research is needed to understand the extent to which this tutoring and “shadow education,” already prevalent before the pandemic (UNESCO, 2017), continued under COVID-19, and if and how it has exacerbated existing inequalities for those who can rely only on their parents and government-distributed materials.<sup>3</sup>

Family support for learning is also evident in how parents and caregivers view at-home learning and prioritize time, such as how much time they allow their children to take from other household duties. In the Save the Children survey, more than half of child respondents indicated that they now have more chores and caregiving duties than before the COVID-19 outbreak, which prevents them from learning at home (Ritz et al., 2020). Far more girls (63%) than boys (43%) reported having an increased household burden, including caring for siblings and other children in the household; survey data from Lebanon show similar results (Save the Children, 2020e). With less time for schoolwork, girls are especially at risk of falling behind their male counterparts.

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<sup>3</sup> UNESCO (2017) defines shadow education, or “private supplementary tutoring,” as “activities that mirror the content of regular schooling, as well as activities that supplement schooling, such as in-depth subject coverage, training in other languages and extracurricular activities” (p. 108).

## 2.2 LOSS OF FORMAL SOCIAL SERVICES AVAILABLE THROUGH SCHOOLS

**Health and MHPSS.** UNESCO (2020c) reported that 89% of countries worldwide offer school-based health and nutrition services, including direct services or referrals to health, social, and MHPSS services (ACPHA, 2020c). For children and young people with disabilities, inclusive schools and those that provide academic support and health services such as therapy can help parents keep children and young people in the family home and out of institutions (Barriga et al., 2017). Indeed, next to the fear of losing learning time, parents and caregivers of children and young people with disabilities are most concerned with the loss of therapy and other services usually available through schools (World Bank, 2020c).

Schools also are often delivery sites for formal MHPSS interventions (see Save the Children, 2018). A review of empirical research on the delivery of MHPSS for women and children in conflict settings (Kamali et al., 2020) found that school-based interventions are effective in improving mental health outcomes. The researchers noted that school-based MHPSS interventions helped to create a non-stigmatizing environment where children and young people could participate without disruption of their daily routines. With schools closed, children and young people also have lost opportunities for SEL, which involves the development of emotional, social, interpersonal, and cognitive processes (INEE, 2016). In exploratory research around the IRC's Healing Classroom programs in Lebanon, Syrian refugee learners demonstrated some tentative progress in SEL (3EA, 2017), which indicates the potential of such initiatives and the subsequent damage their absence due to school closures could accelerate.

**School-Feedings and nutrition.** Of particular concern is the loss of meals and other school-based nutritional services, especially with the current environment of widespread unemployment, rising food prices, and increasing food insecurity (ILO & UNICEF, 2020). Most households in the Save the Children dataset reported experiencing food insecurity, with 43% saying they were "stressed" and 36% "in crisis" (Loperfido & Burgess, 2020). In NRC's (2020) survey with refugee and migrant populations across eight countries, an average of 73% of households indicated that they have cut the number of daily meals they eat since the pandemic began, including 81% in Afghanistan, 86% in Colombia, and 76% in Venezuela. In Latin America, school closures have left an estimated 85 million children and young people who regularly accessed meals at school without this service (CEPAL & UNESCO, 2020).

Also lost with school closures is the convenient and centralized gathering place schools provide for distributing food, and for recording and tracking the health progress of children at risk for various forms of malnutrition, including underweight and overweight, wasting, and nutritional deficiencies. At the peak of the school closures, the World Food Programme (WFP, 2020b, 2020d) estimated that 396 million children (47% of them girls) lacked access to school meals; at the time of writing, that number was 260 million.<sup>4</sup> The risk of being underweight and/or wasting, and the potential for dropout, is keenly experienced by girls whose parents are motivated to enroll them in school because of the food provided (Save the Children, 2020a). Distribution programs for nutrition supplements have also been disrupted by school closures: in Bhutan, for example, an increase in the

<sup>4</sup> See WFP's real-time tracker at <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map/index.html>.

number of children with anemia is predicted, as programs for distributing iron and folic acid supplements have been curtailed (UNICEF, 2020d). Conversely, some children and young people are at risk of unhealthy weight gain (Fore et al., 2020), as cheap food options that are low in nutrients but high in calories replace the nutritious meals offered at school. The risk of obesity increases with confinement, as there are fewer opportunities for children to exercise; in the early stages of the COVID-19 lockdown in China, researchers noted weight gain and a loss of cardiovascular fitness among children accustomed to outdoor exercise and play at school (Wang et al., 2020).

**WASH.** As a place where children and young people spend significant hours of the day, schools are also a focal point for WASH access. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of handwashing and hygiene in preventing the spread of the virus. Increased water usage in Rwanda means that children have to fetch water more frequently, which prevents them from engaging in learning (Children's Voice Today/Save the Children, 2020). United Nations Rwanda (2020a) predicts increased water and sanitation costs; impoverished families unable to afford the increases will likely rely on unsafe water supplies. Moreover, schools play a key role in disseminating accurate information about disease prevention (World Bank, 2020c). A key informant in the DRC noted that this was an added service teachers could offer during the EVD outbreaks, as the communities trusted teachers more readily than health officials, especially in rural areas.

More long-term research is needed on the intersection of schooling, the formal and informal services available at school, and the risk factors for the groups presented in this report. For example, school closures have been found to lead to heightened nutritional deficiencies (UNICEF, 2020d). The literature on gender norms demonstrates that, during times of food scarcity, women and girls in some contexts are both the last to eat and the first to adopt negative coping mechanisms (Mitra & Rao, 2017). Long-term studies of malnutrition and hunger have highlighted their negative effects on children's and young people's overall health outcomes and capacity to learn (Matrins et al., 2011).

## 2.3 LOSS OF INFORMAL SOCIAL AMENITIES AND SAFEGUARDS

In addition to the formal offerings described above, schools provide a variety of informal amenities and social support services that are harder to quantify or capture. For example, schools are often conduits for the provision of less formal psychosocial support (PSS). Unstructured PSS, which differs from formal, trauma-informed mental health interventions, can provide treatment and relief for stress caused by ongoing migration, and it can be provided by people other than mental health practitioners, such as teachers or classroom aides. In nations hosting Syrian refugees, Save the Children (2018) has worked to integrate PSS into school curricula and teacher-training practices. In the schools, teachers embody pedagogical and subject expertise, but they also provide dependable routines and stability, which promotes psychosocial stability for children and young people, particularly in conflict-affected contexts (Mattingly, 2017).

Also lost with school closures are the informal social networks and face-to-face socializing that occur during and around school hours. In Save the Children's widespread survey (Gordon et al., 2020), children and young people reported that they especially miss their friends

and schoolmates, relationships that are vital to their well-being and development (Fischer et al., 2018). Those who were not able to be in touch with friends had higher rates of feeling worried (54%) and unsafe (58%) than those who did have contact (Ritz et al., 2020); these results align with reports from surveys conducted during the EVD epidemic in Sierra Leone (Risso-Gill & Finnegan, 2015). Informal support systems are especially important for LGBTQI young people, in particular those who are confined with household members who do not accept their identity and may treat them with hostility (UNESCO, 2020j). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2020) predicts that this will cause an increase in depression and anxiety among LGBTQI young people.

### 2.3.1 RISING INEQUALITY IN THE AVAILABILITY OF EDUCATION RESOURCES

With the economic impact of the global recession caused by COVID-19 lockdowns, experts predict that there will be a US\$77 billion shortfall in global education funding (Save the Children, 2020g). As schools reopen, the implementation of social distancing measures will strain resources. The physical capacity of the school was a significant and relevant factor during the EVD closures in Sierra Leone and Liberia; with infection prevention and control measures putting limits on their capacity, schools struggled to accommodate all previously enrolled children and young people (Santos & Novelli, 2017). In 2020, with under-resourced and overburdened public schools already strained to capacity, including overly large classes, a key informant in Rwanda indicated (see section 1.1. on methodology) that the decision was made to reopen classrooms first to exam and final year “candidate classes.” Private schools supported by wealthy parents, non-governmental actors, or private interests, which were equipped to accommodate new social distancing and hygiene requirements, reopened quickly. The informant spoke of the sense of unfairness and emotional distress public school children experienced when they watched their private school neighbors attend school while they were still confined to their homes.

There is a risk that children and young people who were already out of school before COVID-19 will be overlooked as the schools struggle to reopen for their existing enrollees. Data from 2019 indicate that, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, 127 million children and young people in crisis-affected countries were out of school; this represents half the global out-of-school population (INEE, 2020a). Those data indicate that girls are more likely to be impacted: 31% of girls and 27% of boys in crisis-affected contexts were out of school. These numbers are now expected to climb.

In Lebanon in 2018-2019, nearly 48% of Syrian and Palestinian refugee children and young people were already out of school (Haddad et al., 2020). The multiplication of crises in Lebanon is already impacting their ability to re-enroll, and even fewer enrollment slots are available in Beirut, where officials are struggling to repair schools damaged in the August 2020 blast while dealing with the closure of government-subsidized private schools. The available public school slots are given to Lebanese students, thus the Syrian and Palestinian refugee children and young people are kept from returning to school as they fail to secure enrolment.

Attacks on schools and damage to school facilities are also expected to have a negative impact on reopening efforts. In eastern DRC, school buildings have been damaged by violent acts or other uses during lockdown, and many schools lack the resources to make repairs or replace materials and furniture (ACAPS, 2020b). Similar reports from Human

Rights Watch (HRW, 2020c) indicate that schools are considered epicenters of violence, with more than 85 attacks against education in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger between March and May 2020, including fires, pillaging, threats, and the kidnapping and killing of students and teachers. Specific attacks in the DRC (ACAPS, 2020b) and Mali (HRW, 2020c) have targeted children and young people sitting for exams. In Yemen, an estimated 20% of schools have been rendered unusable after years of conflict; 380 schools have been attacked in the past five years, and others have been repurposed as isolation centers for COVID-19 patients (Karasapan, 2020).

**Teachers.** Atlantis Group (2020) has warned of “growing rifts” between teachers and education officials over the decisions made about school closures. Following the closures during the EVD outbreak, the supply of teachers was strained, as some had entered other professions. Some, especially those who worked in disease control, were stigmatized and suspended from teaching for fear they would spread the disease (ACAPS, 2016). Informants across the case study contexts reported that, as they worked to adapt to distance modalities while tending to their own households, teachers were exhausted and burnt out.

With the rapid shift to online and distance modalities, there were few options for providing training for teachers to catch up on digital pedagogies, and the burden has been shifted onto teachers individually. Teachers in Rwanda were pointed to an online learning platform with self-directed professional development units. Previous research on teacher-focused materials offered on that platform found that they used complex English and failed to provide much support, other than simply conveying policy directives (Cameron, 2020). A key informant in Rwanda gave examples of respected teachers, especially those teaching lower primary and pre-primary, who struggled with the transition to online platforms and decided to leave the profession entirely.

There also are examples of teachers going unpaid before and during the crisis; thus, the risk is high that teachers, in order to survive, will leave the profession and seek other employment. In Chad, 60% of community teachers have seen their wages stalled, and teachers in the Central African Republic have not been paid since the banks were closed due to COVID-19 (World Bank, 2020c). Teachers in eastern DRC went unpaid in August 2020, which led to teacher protest marches (ACAPS, 2020b). In Lebanon, key informants reported that similar concerns over interrupted wages led to teacher protests, and in Yemen, at least half the teachers have not been paid their salary regularly since 2016 (Karasapan, 2020).

# 3. Child Protection Risks:

## Escalating exposure to harm

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The preventative role played by education and school attendance cannot be underestimated. While schools are not always safe spaces, teachers and school personnel provide a basic level of supervision and a first line of defense for children and young people at risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence.<sup>5</sup> By addressing the root causes of harm and detecting issues of abuse early, schools play an important role in preventing the onset or a recurrence of serious harm to children and young people. While being in school is not the same as learning or having a faultless safeguard against harm, it does enable children and young people to access a quality education and take steps toward achieving well-being. This enhances their ability to learn and grow, and thus their economic potential and later ability to contribute economically, socially, and politically to their societies (INEE, 2010).

With schools closed, children and young people face increased risks. Home confinement has its challenges, as children and young people stuck at home are exposed to more risks. Moreover, because of social distancing measures and other restrictions, services and protective oversight have been curtailed, which denies children and young people access to both formal protection and important informal support networks (UNICEF, 2020e).

These increased risks layer onto other existing emergencies and security crises, especially in crisis-affected contexts. In Burkina Faso, for example, which experienced ongoing armed conflict and widespread flooding, the number of IDPs passed one million in September 2020 (ReliefWeb, 2020). COVID-19-related school closures brought one more shock to its troubled education system; the security situation had already disrupted the school calendar and teaching time. There are concerns that ongoing school closures will cause parents and children to lose their motivation to continue with their education (Coordination du Cluster Education, 2020). Additionally, sexual violence has been shown to increase in conflict zones, where the usual legal protections and routes to justice often are eroded, and criminal perpetrators have little to fear (Sidebotham et al., 2016). In Mali, with the confluence of armed conflict and the pandemic, child trafficking has increased (UNHCR, 2020).

As children and young people are rendered invisible by home confinement and school closures, there is little comprehensive data to present a full picture of the abuses and injustices suffered in countries where there are pre-existing humanitarian crises. In this section, the focus is on several distinct, intersecting areas of risk: the psychosocial effects of abuse on children and young people, the violence children and young people experience in the home, risks encountered online, and, with children and young people out of school, the risk of increased child labor.

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<sup>5</sup> We recognize that schools can be spaces where children and young people experience abuse, and that teachers and other school officials can be the perpetrators (see UNESCO, 2009).

Groups particularly at risk include girls, children and young people with disabilities, children and young people on the move, LGBTQI young people, and children associated with armed forces or armed groups. The risks and injustices facing these groups are exacerbated by the closing of schools and the loss of the stability, material support, and protective oversight provided there. Other marginalized groups, such as children in institutions or living on the street, child-headed households, children in foster care, or those looked after by caregivers with disabilities or elderly guardians, do not generally appear in this report, but they are a population that require specific focus and attention for understanding school closures, as other researchers have also noted (e.g. Bakrania et al., 2020).

### **3.1 CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AT HOME: PSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS**

Children and young people who are cut off from school and the company of people outside their household also lose access to the many services and amenities described above. Parents and caregivers are generally unprepared to help children and young people deal with the lack of structure and routine activities, negative feelings, sense of isolation, and other forms of psychological distress brought on by COVID-19, especially when already juggling caregiving, financial insecurity, and other stressors.

**Mental health and psychosocial health and well-being.** Children and young people confined to their homes have limited access to play, few recreational activities, and little interaction with their peers, all of which have a significant effect on their mental and psychosocial health and well-being. Wang et al. (2020), who studied COVID-19-related school closures in China in late 2019, state that children experienced fear, stress, frustration, boredom, and feelings of isolation when confined to their homes.

Similar trends are evident in emerging data. A Save the Children survey indicated that 83% of children and young people and 89% of caregivers reported an increase in negative feelings, which increased as schools remained closed for periods of 17 to 19 weeks (Ritz et al., 2020). Nearly half of parents surveyed (46%) reported seeing signs of psychological distress in their children, including changes in sleep and appetite and in how they handled their emotions, and more frequent aggressive behavior, all of which increased in the weeks following the school closures. In South Asia, 35% of parents in Pakistan and Afghanistan who participated in a UNICEF rapid behavioral and sentiment assessment reported similarly that their children and young people were showing signs of mental distress, and that they had been unable to access health care services (Hikmah, 2020). Finally, 63% of parents surveyed by Viamo (2020) across francophone Africa agreed that the pandemic was having significant negative repercussions for their children's mental health.

Previous research has established that quarantined children and young people suffer feelings of isolation and PTSD (OECD, 2020). In a comparative review of studies of mental health during periods of quarantine, such as during the severe acute respiratory syndrome epidemic in 2003 and the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic, researchers noted that nearly all the studies reported negative psychological effects among both adults and children (Brooks et al., 2020). For example, one study reported that children who were quarantined scored four times higher than their non-quarantined peers for PTSD markers, and



a quarter of their parents had enough symptoms to warrant a PTSD diagnosis (Sprang & Silman, 2020). Not enough research exists to establish the prevalence of PTSD and mental health challenges among children today, but there are worrying reports of a recent rise in attempted suicide by children and adults. UNICEF (2020d), which reported on interventions in cases of attempted child suicide in Bangladesh, also reported a 40% increase in suicide in Nepal, primarily among girls, as reported by police.

**Children and young people as an increased “burden.”** The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020) has described the home during the COVID-19 lockdown, where all of the above factors come together, as a “pressure cooker” in which parents and caregivers are struggling to provide for their children’s academic needs. This includes covering the increased costs of learning materials and additional food for their children, who have lost access to the meal programs offered at school. This all occurs while parents are balancing possible job loss, financial insecurity, worsening mental health (“The Intersection of COVID-19,” 2020), and feelings of isolation and helplessness. The literature makes it evident that parents were caught unawares and had no plans in place to deal with the increased parenting roles required when the schools closed and their children were confined to the home. The differences in available resources and caregiver time and attention are another facet of growing social inequality.

Some parents and caregivers have succumbed to negative parenting strategies and abuse; others have left their children un- or under-supervised. Some parents and caregivers, whose children have limited access to learning options during lockdown, may perceive them to be unproductively engaged. This is another cause for concern, as idle children and young people often are increasingly drawn or pushed toward a whole host of harms, including child labor, CEFM, and trafficking, as well as recruitment and use by armed forces or militant groups.

## **3.2 VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE HOME**

Mistreatment of children and young people within the home has been rising globally since the start of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Environmental factors that impact caregivers—such as heightened financial worries and stress from additional caregiving responsibilities for out-of-school children—can trigger harmful parental coping strategies. For example, an increase in corporal punishment was reported in Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis (Fischer et al., 2018). Widespread violence against children and young people was also reported in the DRC (World Vision, 2020a) and other nations affected by Ebola, including an increase in sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse (Hallgarten, 2020).

There are still significant gaps in reporting the abuse of children and young people, which is thought to be on the rise with school closures and home confinement (Peterman & O’Donnell, 2020). As noted earlier, child protection helplines have reported a higher number of calls globe-wide, while child protection agencies have struggled to provide an adequate response. A key informant from Lebanon noted that child protection officials are using monthly or “real time” monitoring on incoming data to gain insights into current trends and to determine what services the agencies are requesting most often, rather than waiting for the results of longitudinal surveys. Save the

Children survey data provide evidence of an increase in negative or violent parenting methods, as reported by 22% of the caregivers surveyed; a further 32% of all participants reported that physical and/or verbal abuse had occurred within the home, and that children and young people who were out of school reported experiencing higher rates of abuse (Ritz et al., 2020).

### 3.3 ONLINE RISKS

For some children and young people, confinement to the home has meant that they spend more time on online platforms for both distance learning and recreation. Parents burdened with other duties may not have time to provide adequate supervision and, as one stakeholder in Rwanda reported, they also may lack knowledge of the safeguarding tools built into devices and apps. The UK's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children labelled the situation "a perfect storm" for increased online sexual exploitation and abuse (Grierson, 2020). Out-of-school children and young people worldwide, who may be suffering from loneliness, anxiety, or depression due to the isolation of lockdown, spend more inadequately supervised time online, which makes them especially susceptible to cyberbullying and online predators. Poverty and increased financial insecurity can also drive an increase in online commercial sex work and exploitation, especially as the internet removes the physical barriers of distance and national borders. In 2018, *The Guardian* reported on British pedophiles who specifically targeted children and young people in impoverished and crisis-affected contexts, such as the Philippines, Kenya, and Cambodia—all nations with high smartphone usage and quick, anonymous money transfer platforms (Kelly, 2018). But even within their existing networks, increased direct messaging between children and trusted adults, such as teachers, opens up the possibility of grooming and exploitation (Save the Children, 2020a).

### 3.4 CHILD LABOR

ACPHA (2020b) has identified school closures as one factor contributing to increased child labor, including the worst forms of child labor (WFCL) in contexts of increased poverty and food insecurity. This "involves children being enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and illnesses and/or left to fend for themselves on the streets of large cities—often at a very early age" (ILO, n.d., para. 5). No comprehensive data exist to provide a complete and accurate picture of child labor in 2020, but the ILO (2020a) estimates that an additional 66 million children will be engaged in work during the COVID-19 crisis as their households try to survive. During previous economic crises, there was a link between decreased household income and increased child labor. Côte d'Ivoire's 1990 economic crisis, for example, brought a 10% drop in income, which correlated with a 5% increase in child labor and a 10% decrease in educational progress (ILO & UNICEF, 2020, p. 8).

Child labor is complex and multifaceted. Many families have previously relied on their children to work during school holidays but, as the desperation of the current economic situation requires many children and young people to contribute to family finances, there is growing evidence of an increase in child labor among vulnerable populations worldwide. A 21.5% increase in child labor was reported in the cocoa fields in Côte d'Ivoire

from March to May 2020; this was attributed to the “shock” of COVID-19 shutdowns (ICI Foundation, 2020). Stakeholders across Lebanon and Jordan also report increased child labor among refugee families that suffer from extreme poverty (Plan International, 2020). Reports from Mali indicate that school closures due to conflict and COVID-19, and parallel teacher strikes, are pushing children and young people to work in informal gold mines in areas controlled by armed groups (Global Protection Cluster, 2020). UN-HCR (2020) also reports that armed groups in Mali are trafficking children and young people to work in the gold mines.

Households in which a parent or caregiver has a disability have suffered disproportionately from the loss of jobs and income (World Vision Lanka, 2020). Consequently, children and young people in these households report higher rates of employment than those in households where the breadwinner does not have a disability (Ritz et al., 2020). Previous research in Nepal indicated that children and young people whose parent has a disability and those who have lost a parent faced the highest risk for WFCL (Edmonds, 2010).

## **3.5 AT-RISK POPULATIONS**

### **3.5.1 RISKS FACED BY GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN**

School closures have caused specific child protection risks for girls and young women. In crisis situations, girls are twice as likely as boys to be out of school, and the risks they encounter increase their likelihood of not returning to school once the crisis has passed; the risk for girls with disabilities is even greater (Gordon et al., 2020). The Malala Fund (2020) has estimated that a further 20 million girls of secondary school age will drop out of school due to the effects of COVID-19.

The risks girls face are many and varied, and the EVD school closures again serve as a guide. From 2014 to 2016, aid agencies across West Africa reported increased violence and abuse in Sierra Leone (Bandiera et al., 2018) and the DRC (World Vision, 2020a) that specifically targeted girls (Hallgarten, 2020), including a spike in transactional sex (Risso-Gill & Finnegan, 2015), CEFM, and pregnancy. When schools began to reopen, girls struggled to return; many had taken up caregiving duties when other family members got sick or died and thus were not able return to school (CARE, 2020). Structural barriers also prevented pregnant girls from continuing their studies: in Sierra Leone, the boys who got girls pregnant were allowed to continue their schooling, while visibly pregnant girls were excluded from school and from sitting for exams (Denney et al., 2015). Moreover, after giving birth, child mothers were largely unable to return to school, due to their parenting duties. It is worth noting that the law prohibiting pregnant girls from attending school was reversed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Girls are particularly at risk of increased SGBV, intimate partner violence, and sexual exploitation and abuse during the current home confinement (Peterman & O'Donnell, 2020), which threatens to reverse nearly three decades of progress in addressing gender inequality (Save the Children, 2020d). With schools closed and other protective mechanisms made inaccessible due to the pandemic, violence against girls and young women is expected to increase, especially in conflict contexts (Kapur, 2020b). Girls with disabilities are likely to experience some of the worst abuse, including a greater increase than their

peers in physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and exploitation (Save the Children, 2020d). Girls who are working also face the secondary risk of SGBV (ILO & UNICEF, 2020) and sexual exploitation and abuse, which can lead to unwanted pregnancy and, especially for child mothers, increased health risks, such as fistula (Kapur, 2020b).

While global empirical data specific to COVID-19 might be lacking, the correlation between crisis and child marriage has been well documented (Masheka, 2020). World Vision (2020b) estimates that an additional four million girls will be forced into marriage in the next two years, due to the COVID-19 school closures; CEFM is already being reported in eastern DRC (ACAPS, 2020b) and Kenya (AMREF Health Africa, 2020). In the Bidibidi refugee settlement in Uganda, authorities reported six instances of child marriage, two forced marriages, and 19 teenage pregnancies; they also pointed out that the majority of such cases go unreported (World Vision, 2020c). World Vision (2020c) also reports that school closures have been found to increase teenage pregnancy by as much as 65%, and that an estimated one million schoolgirls from sub-Saharan Africa may be unable to return to school after the pandemic due to pregnancy.

Save the Children (2020a) predicts a global increase of FGM/C performed in the home, which is often linked with child marriage (Kapur, 2020b). Instances of FGM/C have already been reported in Somalia (Brown, 2020), while in Kenya, 58% of respondents to community surveys conducted by AMREF Health Africa (2020) indicate that FGM/C has increased during COVID-19. This risk correlates directly with school closures, thus demonstrating the direct harm girls experience when they cannot attend school (Kapur, 2020b). 'Door-to-door' FGM, where the procedure is carried out within the home, occurred in northern Kenya and Somalia precisely because the schools were closed; because girls require time to heal from the cuts inflicted, their absence from their schools, were they still open, would have raised concern. The long-term health effects of FGM/C are dire and can include life-endangering physical and mental health complications. With children and young people confined to their homes and cut off from school oversight, this form of abuse is less likely to be detected.

Related to health more broadly, girls, and children and young people in general, have lost ready access to medication and consistent medical check-ups, as health systems currently prioritize the COVID-19 response (ILGA Europe, 2020). In Sri Lanka, 30% of survey participants have been unable to access health services; 47% with children under the age of five have not had access to maternal/child services, as transportation is either unavailable or too expensive (World Vision Lanka, 2020). Moreover, schools often provide girls with information and material support for menstruation and hygiene (WHO/UNICEF, 2020) and for sexual and reproductive health, especially about preventing pregnancy. In the Bidibidi settlement, where child mothers are stigmatized, families often are reluctant to report a pregnancy or access prenatal care, which can result in underweight births (World Vision, 2020c). With the EVD outbreaks, Fischer et al. (2018) reported a rise in risky sexual behavior among young people, who had reduced access to the relevant health information.

### 3.5.2 RISKS FACED BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

As indicated throughout the previous section, the loss of face-to-face schooling is keenly felt by children and young people with disabilities. Even before COVID-19, these children and young people suffered some of the highest rates of exclusion; in some countries, just 1% of children and young people with disabilities were enrolled in formal schooling (ACPHA, 2020a). Those who currently lack access to inclusive digital platforms and other distance learning offerings require increased adult support to engage in learning, which may not be available. Severe loss of social and educational attainment has been predicted globally for children and young people with disabilities (Loperfido & Burgess, 2020).

During home confinement, children and young people with disabilities face other severe protection risks. Girls with disabilities are nearly three times more likely to experience sexual violence than their peers without disabilities (Hughes et al., 2012). Both boys and girls with disabilities are more likely than their non-disabled peers to face abuse in their homes and from outside caregivers (Able Child Africa, 2020). Gender norms again contribute to the increased risks faced by girls with disabilities, as they often are prevented from outside recreation, which is not true of boys with disabilities. Research conducted across the globe has found that 90% of children and young people with intellectual impairments have been the victim of some form of sexual violence. Girls with sensory impairments have four times greater risk of experiencing sexual violence than their peers without disabilities (Kapur, 2020b). As if this were not enough, there are important intersections between disability, SGBV, and the prevalence of human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) and other sexually transmitted infections. The indirect effects of sexual violence include increased rates of HIV infection and pregnancy. Mac-Seing and Boggs (2014), for example, have noted instances where women with disabilities and living with HIV become pregnant from risky or coercive sexual encounters, and then are left in “monoparental and precarious situations.”

When children and young people with disabilities are removed from school and confined to the home, their caregivers are better able to hide abuse, given the lack of school oversight and limited access to health care options, which leaves fewer avenues for signs of abuse to be detected or reported (Able Child Africa, 2020; UNESCO, 2020j). The World Bank (2020c) reports that, with the COVID-19 lockdowns, children and young people in institutional care were sent back to their homes, where the families often had little time to prepare to care for them. Such children and young people who live in a charged home environment are especially vulnerable to neglect and abuse, as caregivers may be unable to provide for their special needs.

As schools begin to reopen, there are specific concerns about children and young people with disabilities. As a population largely out of school in normal times, they can be the “hardest to reach” (UNESCO, 2020c, p. 72) and thus may fail to be re-enrolled, which will put them at particular risk for exclusion and dropout. Parents in West Africa were reluctant to allow children and young people with disabilities to return to school after the Ebola crisis, fearing they would be at increased risk of infection (Hallgarten, 2020). Discrimination and entrenched beliefs about disability also may curtail re-enrollment when education resources are strained. Humanity and Inclusion (2020b) indicates that, during the EVD crisis, it was particularly difficult to overcome assumptions that it was a “waste of resources” to educate children and young people with disabilities.

### 3.5.3 RISKS FACED BY LGBTQI YOUTH

Worldwide, people who are perceived to be or identify as LGBTQI have been blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic. The UN High Commissioner of Human Rights cites “an increase in homophobic and transphobic rhetoric” (International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute, 2020, p. 5). LGBTQI young people are known to face abuse and derision within their homes, and they are among those most vulnerable during disasters (UN Women, 2020). There is some evidence of a rise in GBV, sexual abuse, and exploitation of queer youth (UNESCO, 2020j) during the COVID-19 school closures. However, as noted by a key informant in Sri Lanka, it is often difficult to account for the risks faced by the LGBTQI youth population, as home confinement gives them another reason to hide or suppress their identity. Researchers may focus instead on more visible risk groups within the LGBTQI population, such as young people engaged in sex work, who reported increased abuse during the lockdown in Sri Lanka (Phakathi, 2020).

### 3.5.4 RISKS FACED BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

For refugees, migrants, and IDPs worldwide, the stressors of the pandemic exacerbate existing precarity. Refugees and IDPs are particularly impacted by the economic downturn; in an NRC (2020) needs assessments, 77% of respondents reported losing work or income; of those dependent on remittances from family and friends in other countries, 62% said that they were receiving less money than before. Many lack access to a social safety net and thus adopt negative coping strategies to mitigate their poverty. Plan International Lebanon (2020), for example, reported that Syrian refugee families experiencing extreme economic precarity turned to child labor, including sending children and young people out to work in agriculture for up to ten hours each day. A key informant in Lebanon noted that, because they attract less negative attention from authorities, who prevent refugees from working, children and young people are at less risk than adults when working to help support their families.

In conflict-affected contexts, internally displaced children and young people face a particular risk of violence. In Yemen, where eight out of ten people were already in need of humanitarian assistance before the pandemic, the International Organization for Migration reported that IDPs had been the target of misinformation campaigns, with “xenophobia and xenophobic attacks being directed at displaced people” (UN News, 2020). Karasapan (2020) reported on the extreme mental and emotional toll that years of war, disease, and poverty have had on Yemen’s children and young people, more than half of whom struggle with depression. Before the pandemic, 2 million Yemeni children and young people were already out of school, with an additional 3.7 million at risk of dropping out. In Somalia, internally displaced children and young people were at “high risk” for WFCL and recruitment into the Al-Shabaab terrorist group, while in Niger, communities that refused to give up their children to armed groups were forcibly displaced (Global Protection Cluster, 2020). In the DRC, internally displaced children and young people in the Ituri province are struggling to access adequate housing, and the existing strain on school resources—even the availability of desks—prevents schools from accommodating learners who are IDPs (ACAPS, 2020b).

Without the structure and stability schools provide, and as protective services are cut, refugee and internally displaced girls of pre-adolescent and adolescent age in particular

face increasing risk of abuse. UNICEF (2020d) reported on the increased abuse of girls in the overcrowded Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, and Plan International (2020) offered growing anecdotal evidence of CEFM increasing, especially among Syrian refugee girls in Lebanon, as families become increasingly desperate.

### **3.5.5 CHILDREN ASSOCIATED WITH ARMED FORCES OR ARMED GROUPS**

In conflict-affected contexts, given the climate of political upheaval and economic insecurity, ACPHA (2020c) warns that rates of children associated with armed forces or armed groups is likely to increase. Historically, adolescent boys have been disproportionately targeted for recruitment and use worldwide, thus their gender and age make them especially vulnerable during a crisis like the current pandemic (Kapur, 2020b). As with child labor, the push-pull factors driving children and young people to join these groups are complex, and they go beyond forcible recruitment. Some may join because of perceived economic opportunities; a key informant noted that children and young people in eastern DRC “voluntarily” join armed groups because of the economic incentives offered. With schools closed and few other avenues for work available, some join up because it gives them “something to do.” Kapur (2020b) also indicated that recruits are “sometimes driven by religious radicalization or acts of vengeance, and sometimes because of the pull of guns, uniforms and feelings of power” (p. 34).

Reports have emerged on the increased presence of children and young people in armed groups, and of forcible recruitment and kidnapping occurring in eastern DRC (ACAPS, 2020b). Reports from Colombia also indicate increased recruitment (Notimérica, 2020; “¿Quién es el Responsable?” 2020), and in Mali, as many child recruitment cases were reported in the first six months of 2020 as during all of 2019 (UNHCR, 2020). With movement restricted, Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms on grave violations against children have been curtailed; country task forces have been unable to conduct face-to-face verification missions and have had to rely on remote modalities (ACPHA, 2020c; Kapur, 2020b).

With growing evidence of increased recruitment and use of children and young people by armed groups, the role of schools in curbing this activity is key. When in session, schools provide important structure and stability and occupy pupils’ time. With schools shuttered, the informal monitoring conducted by teachers and other school officials is lost, increasing the risk that children and young people will slip through the cracks (Save the Children, 2008). This is especially true in Colombia, where teachers are practiced in “spotting the tell-tale signs of grooming” by illegal armed group recruiters (Taylor, 2020). In more normal times, youth club leaders in the Central African Republic’s schools help to identify at-risk children and young people, according to Plan International (2017). Attending school also offers a motivation to reintegrate children and young people back into society, as it presents a viable alternative to being used by an armed force or group. Schools also can serve as sites for release and reintegration programs and services, as has been done in Nepal (UNICEF, 2008).

# 4. Case Studies:

## Country-specific highlights from around the world

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In the five case studies that follow, the impacts of school closures and the increased risks children and young people face for abuse, neglect, and exploitation are considered within the specific country contexts of Colombia, the DRC, Lebanon, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka.

### 4.1 CASE STUDY: COLOMBIA



#### 4.1.1 COUNTRY CONTEXT

Prior to COVID-19, Colombia experienced significant humanitarian challenges. The main challenge was the internal armed conflict between guerrilla fighters, paramilitary groups, and government forces, along with the flow of forcibly displaced populations, refugees, and migrants, primarily from Venezuela. The COVID-19 crisis arrived on the heels of socio-political instability, which included mass protests against the government in November and December 2019, which disrupted community and family life (Rodríguez Pinzón, 2020). COVID-19 has affected Colombia's most vulnerable sectors of society, especially the Afro and indigenous IDP communities that lack adequate food, shelter, and



WASH facilities (Vivanco, 2020). In Colombia, 70% of the 5.5 million IDPs have “severe or catastrophic” food insecurity (ACAPS, 2020a, p. 2), while 82% of the Venezuelan refugee and migrant families in Colombia have reduced the number of daily meals they eat. The most vulnerable groups in Colombia—including Colombian IDPs, Venezuelan refugees and migrants, Colombians returning from Venezuela, indigenous communities, and other low-income households—face overlapping crises and thus are most at risk of adopting negative coping measures, such as child labor or children and young people joining armed groups. *The Lancet* (Espinel et al., 2020) has identified Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Colombia as being at heightened risk for depression and anxiety, PTSD, and substance abuse disorders; Colombian IDPs face similar risks.

Schools have played an important role in addressing these inequalities; before the pandemic, for example, an estimated four million children and young people relied on school meals. Due in part to the rapid measures taken by the government at the start of the pandemic, COVID-19 school closures have heightened many existing issues, such as food insecurity, unemployment, and abuse and exploitation, such as child labor (Quintero Rivera, 2020). School closures also have had an immediate effect on how education is delivered and who has access to it (UNOCHA, 2020). School closures and increased economic stress, much of it due to the rising unemployment rate, have caused a steep rise in child labor in the region (CEPAL & UNESCO, 2020).

#### 4.1.2 EDUCATION DURING COVID-19

Since March 2020, when Colombia announced its first COVID-19 case, isolation measures and lockdowns have been in place throughout the country. This meant closing all education centers and marked the beginning of virtual education delivery. Although the Ministry of National Education responded quickly to COVID-19 by providing an amended academic calendar, an adapted school meals program, distance learning opportunities, and more (World Bank, 2020a), difficulties started to emerge when the ministry began developing a plan for virtual learning. Both teachers and students lacked sufficient support networks to meet learning objectives, and access to internet connectivity, technological skills, and resources was unequal (“Desbandada en los Colegios,” 2020; UNESCO, 2020b, 2020d). As such, there was a significant digital gap between rural and urban areas, and even between different urban areas. A key informant stressed that “this digital gap is one of the greatest challenges in terms of education,” as children and young people from rural areas did not have the same access to instructional materials and subject aids or the required technological tools and resources as those in urban areas (Suárez & Dario, 2020). As key informants noted, these challenges increased the educational inequalities that already affected the most vulnerable groups, such as migrants, those with pre-existing learning difficulties or disabilities, and those living in poverty (CEPAL & UNESCO, 2020; UNESCO, 2020b).

The closure of schools not only interrupted learning; it disrupted the role schools play in the community as protective spaces where children and young people can access social services (UNESCO, 2020b). Evidence from key informants and the World Bank (2020a) show that school closures have increased children’s and young people’s risk of learning loss and dropout. This will have consequences beyond the pandemic crisis (Universidad de los Andes, 2020) for those who had to give up schooling to earn money, as it increases

the risk that they will permanently drop out (“El Cierre de Colegios,” 2020). Key informants reported that, due to COVID-19, an estimated 60,000 boys and girls will not be able to return to school; of that number, just 1,252 were reported by the Ministry of National Education, indicating the gap between official reporting and what stakeholders report.

The government announced that schools would begin a staggered approach to reopening in September 2020, which was to include a blended learning approach. To open safely, schools required double shifts of security and cleaning personnel, adequate space for social distancing, and suitable WASH facilities; experts were concerned that such resources may not be readily available (UNOCHA, 2020). Key informants also expressed concerns for the future opportunities of children and young people who have not been able to access schooling, as the pandemic could have an unforeseen impact on their current education and their future participation in higher education.

### 4.1.3 CHILD PROTECTION: RISKS AND RESPONSE

Preventive health measures, including school closures and lockdowns, have presented new challenges for child protection professionals. As families are forced into closer contact, the level of stress has increased for both parents and children (Universidad de los Andes, 2020), and key informants and UNESCO (2020b) have reported that children and young people are suffering from altered routines, fear of illness, parental stress, and personal isolation. More serious concerns within the home have also increased, such as the risk of physical, emotional, and even sexual violence among children and young people, especially those between 12 and 14 years old (Fundación Renacer, 2020; OEAC-CIM, 2020; UNOCHA, 2020). As key informants indicated, not all family or community environments are safe for children and young people; some are at risk of sexual exploitation, trafficking, CEFM, or neglect. Moreover, while children and young people are not physically attending school, an increasing number are engaged in both paid and unpaid labor; within the home, unpaid domestic work is falling disproportionately on girls and women (ILO, 2020b; “El Cierre de Colegios,” 2020).

There are other risks to consider that have to do with the specific context of Colombia. Historically, Colombia has seen large numbers of children and young people become engaged with armed groups, many of them forcibly recruited. In recent years, some of these young people were released and reintegrated into Colombian society as part of peace agreements. Thus, the revived widespread recruitment of children and young people into armed groups is a concerning development that threatens the five-year-old peace process (UN, 2020). Recent reports indicate that multiple armed groups and criminal bands have expanded their activities, taking advantage of the Colombian army’s need to attend to the current social and health emergency (Rodríguez Pinzón, 2020). Key informants report an increase in violence, displacements associated with growing territorial struggles, and the increased recruitment of children and young people by armed groups. The risk is more extreme for children and young people from already marginalized groups, as one key informant shared: “It is a big concern for the country, for indigenous communities and Venezuelan migrant children as well, as they are recruited, and armed groups become a job offer for children.”

Government actors have worked alongside NGOs to raise awareness and improve the protection of children and young people, and forms of response. They are working to improve the system of reporting and responding to sexual violence, while also initiating

projects to support caregivers and teachers. This is especially important for teachers, who play a key role in detecting and reporting cases of violence toward children and young people (Taylor, 2020). Other measures include a flexible education project that addresses xenophobia, particularly toward Venezuelan migrant children and young people and the indigenous population, and GBV. There also are protection-based projects that offer training and materials to various civil society organizations concerned with protecting children and young people (UNOCHA, 2020). Another important government initiative highlighted by key informants was the radio education strategy, which was launched on stations throughout Colombia. The programs focus on raising children's and young people's awareness of the assistance available if they should find themselves in a violent situation.

#### **4.1.4 MOVING FORWARD: FOCUS ON PREVENTION**

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the many challenges Colombia faces in terms of child protection and the important role schools play in mitigating some of the risks children and young people face. Key informants spoke to the need to prioritize a careful reopening of the schools, as they provide many protective functions and services at the community level, such as school meal programs, health and vaccination services, recreational opportunities, and early childhood development (CEPAL & UNESCO, 2020; Universidad de los Andes, 2020). Informants note further that it is crucial that the return to school supports students who are struggling and have been unable to access quality educational materials during the lockdown. Schools therefore should avoid putting too much pressure on students in their effort to compensate for lost learning time (UNESCO, 2020d). This will require increased coordination and a rethinking of education to make it more flexible, responsive, and inclusive for all students, particularly the most vulnerable (World Bank, 2020a; UNESCO, 2020d; UNOCHA, 2020).

Along with safe and inclusive reopening, there is increasing need for greater technical capacity in underserved territories (UNOCHA, 2020), especially to address the connectivity problems key informants reported in rural areas. Increased use of mobile phones can serve as a stopgap measure to deliver certain services, such as sexual and reproductive health services (OEAC-CIM, 2020); this will help to protect and support girls at risk of teenage pregnancy, child marriage, sexual, and intra-family violence. Policies and programs also must attend to the increasing forced recruitment of children and young people by armed groups (ILO, 2020b; "El Cierre de Colegios," 2020). Finally, with child labor a great concern during and after the COVID-19 crisis, there is a significant need for political agendas to focus on child labor; stakeholders must work to provide effective prevention strategies, even as they strive to reinvigorate the economy (ILO, 2020b).

## 4.2 CASE STUDY: DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO



Elikya Primary School in Mbandaka, DRC © Jean-Claude Wenga, UNICEF

### 4.2.1 COUNTRY CONTEXT

The DRC, Central Africa's most populous nation, is characterized by a near-constant state of political crisis, protracted conflict, and acute cycles of violence concentrated in the country's eastern corridor. More than 100 armed groups, both local and foreign, operate in the area, which triggers pendular patterns of mass population displacement across several provinces in eastern DRC. There are an estimated 1.5 million IDPs at any given time in the province of North Kivu alone (European Commission, 2019).

### 4.2.2 IMPACT ON EDUCATION

The nationwide lockdown instituted on March 19, 2020, precipitated the closure of schools across the DRC. The usual nine-month academic year was essentially cut down to five months and, according to one key informant, many schools granted promotions to the next grade "by attributing marks as formalities, rather than as a result of rigorous testing or assessment." While schools temporarily reopened to allow final-year primary, secondary, and university students to sit for their national examinations in August, full reopening for all grades did not take place until October (Ging, 2020).

Before the pandemic, at least seven million children and young people ages 5 to 17 were already out of school, including more than half of all school-age girls (UNICEF, 2020c). Girls in the DRC have lower completion rates than boys at both the primary and secondary levels, and these gender disparities continue to widen with age (UNESCO, 2020e). In September 2019, a new presidential initiative known as Operationalize Free Education massively boosted school enrollment rates, which led to increased overcrowding; each classroom held between 80 and 150 pupils, with three or more pupils per desk (USAID, 2020). Teachers have protested their increased workload and interrupted wages during the lockdown period (ACAPS, 2020b).

Within a few months of the lockdown distance learning measures were put in place (Coordination du Cluster Education, 2020). In April, Radio Okapi began hosting a UNICEF-funded learning program (UNICEF, 2020b), whereby 237 daily radio programs and 25 television channels were used to deliver lessons (ACAPS, 2020b). A key informant reported that paper-based learning materials and solar-powered radios were distributed by key education stakeholders soon after. By the time schools reopened, UNICEF (2020g) had printed and distributed approximately 450,000 exercise books, primarily in remote areas; this fell far short of its goal of 2.5 million. Another informant reported that the lack of reliable electric power, compounded by limited internet access, hampered distance learning for the vast majority of children and young people in the DRC and ultimately favored those from wealthier families who had consistent power and online access, as well as IT literacy. For many, this meant that little to no learning was happening at all. The mother of a 9-year-old girl in Oicha commented that “my girl is no longer learning, she is only waiting for the reopening to continue her studies” (HRV, 2020b). According to research by Save the Children (2020b), only 15% of children and young people in the DRC had access to distance learning modalities; this number was as low as 4% in the eastern provinces, such as North Kivu.

Informants report that, in actions contrary to the government’s endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration in 2015 and the promulgation of complementary Guidelines on Protecting Schools and Universities from Attacks during Armed Conflict (GCPEA, 2014), school infrastructure was damaged during the lockdown, as schools were occupied by both armed groups and IDPs. In August, an exam center was attacked the night before examinations were to be held, and several female students were raped. At another location, a primary student was killed while sitting for exams (ACAPS, 2020b).

### 4.2.3 CHILD PROTECTION RISKS AND RESPONSE

When COVID-19 broke out, service providers and the general population, particularly in areas previously affected by Ebola, were able to capitalize on their experience with the 2019-2020 Ebola epidemic, which was the tenth such outbreak in the DRC. Children, young people, and communities were already sensitized to the need for social distancing and good hygiene, including finding ways to keep up regular handwashing, “even in places with water scarcity,” as one informant noted. These measures were therefore easier to implement at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools located in the Ebola-afflicted provinces were well versed in the need for temperature checks and handwashing stations, as an informant reported, and teachers were accustomed to their role as impromptu public health agents. Known and trusted by their students and communities, teachers are uniquely positioned to share information about the virus and are more likely to be believed, particularly in contexts where misinformation and mistrust of outsiders is commonplace (Kapur, 2020b).

Key informants reported that schools generally remained open during previous Ebola outbreaks, largely in recognition of the protection they offer, even though approximately 30% of all fatalities in the 2019-2020 Ebola epidemic were children and young people (Kapur, 2020b). Despite the significantly lower fatality rate among children and young people, the ministry of health was quick to close schools at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2020b). According to one key informant, this may be due to the

“influence of European decisions to close schools, even though the experience in the DRC is very different from those nations.” As a result, children and young people have been exposed to heightened risks, which differentially impact girls and boys of various ages (Save the Children, 2020a).

Localized efforts by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to relay the global call issued by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict for armed groups to liberate children and young people during the pandemic had a surprising response. Despite their usual widespread recruitment and use of children and young people, a number of armed groups “voluntarily opted to release children from their ranks, primarily motivated by fears of widespread infection and economic pressures” (Kapur, 2020b, p. 54). Nevertheless, children and young people not fully engaged in education and facing financial precarity were still at a higher risk of both coerced or so-called voluntary recruitment. This was particularly true as the COVID-19 crisis deepened and children and young people searched for “something else to do,” as a key informant reported. A parent of two secondary school students in Beni town said, “The fear for me...is that they will get lost and join the armed groups in the region” (HRW, 2020b). The exact number of children and young people recruited during the pandemic is difficult to ascertain, due to the impact the crisis has had on monitoring and verification efforts. That said, recruitment efforts are likely to have had a greater impact on boys, given the disproportionate extent to which they are targeted for recruitment and use in the DRC (Kapur, 2020b).

Like sexual violence, which is endemic in eastern DRC, the weakening of protective mechanisms during the outbreak has allowed perpetrators to act with impunity (Kapur, 2020b). Girls of reproductive age are at particular risk of missing out on their education due to early and/or unwanted pregnancies, additional childcare responsibilities, and a multitude of other physical and psychological consequences of sexual violence (HRW, 2018). Cases have been recorded by actors in health zones across the country (e.g. Street Child, 2020). Pregnant students are typically not allowed to attend classes and are barred from taking examinations, as a key informant reported. Out-of-school girls, particularly adolescents, are also at increased risk of child marriage, though nationwide empirical data is still lacking.

Child labor has always existed in the DRC, and it is possible that the combination of school closures and economic uncertainty may have exacerbated its prevalence (Fédération des entreprises du Congo, 2020; Gouvernement RDC, 2020). A key informant stressed that it is important to understand the “complexity of the picture”; for example, parents may have their children accompany them to the agricultural fields to avoid leaving them at home unattended. Nevertheless, she continued, it is a context in which they are seen as “income generators, especially if they are out of school and not otherwise occupied.” As a result, “thousands of children have been trapped into child labour...[subjected to] outright slavery or insignificant pay, ill treatment, and overwork.” Another informant reported that gang recruiters in urban areas may be exploiting the increased hunger, neglect, and economic pressures (Save the Children, 2020c) to exhort children and young people to partake in criminal activities.

#### 4.2.4 MOVING FORWARD: CAPITALIZING ON OPPORTUNITIES CREATED BY CRISIS

As one key informant noted, “COVID-19 has provided additional funds [for programs for children and young people] and allowed for an increased focus on children.” Another reported that this is particularly true for street-connected children and young people and those in detention—two categories that have often been sidelined due to budgetary constraints. Government decrees at the onset of the outbreak allowed many children and young people who were in prison or detention centers to be released, which providing an entry point for UNICEF and other actors to advocate for alternative measures to detention and promote family reunification.

The response to COVID-19 has, paradoxically, created an opportunity to ensure that out-of-school children and young people, especially girls, are able to resume their education. Targeted back-to-school campaigns and sustained investment in human capital and school infrastructure have the potential to fulfill the country’s ambition of universal enrollment (Save the Children, 2020b).

### 4.3 CASE STUDY: LEBANON



#### 4.3.1 COUNTRY CONTEXT

Prior to COVID-19, Lebanon was experiencing ongoing turmoil. Due to nearly a decade of war in neighboring Syria, Lebanon hosts more refugees per capita than any other nation, including 1.5 million Syrian refugees since 2011 and an estimated 175,000 long-term Palestinian refugees. In 2019, Lebanon was shaken by a financial crisis and accompanying political unrest, with widespread protests focused on higher taxes and living costs, corruption, a stagnating economy, and the government’s inability to provide basic services such as water and power (Haddad et al., 2020). COVID-19 has exacerbated the existing



poverty and threatened any remaining economic stability. UNICEF (2020h) estimates that 50% of Lebanese population and 75% of Syrians living in Lebanon today are experiencing extreme poverty. According to NRC (2020), 90% of Syrian refugees, 80% of Palestinians living in Lebanon, and 70% of Lebanese have lost jobs or suffered pay cuts since the outbreak of COVID-19; 81% of Syrian refugees report that they cannot pay their rent.

On August 4, 2020, just as the lockdown eased and schools began to resume operation, a massive explosion at the Port of Beirut caused extensive damage throughout the city, with 190 deaths and more than 6,000 injuries (UNICEF, 2020h). The explosion exacerbated existing problems of food and shelter shortages: 85% of the nation's cereal supply was lost (UN Women, 2020) and 300,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, both of which threaten the safety of 100,000 children and young people.

### 4.3.2 EDUCATION UNDER LOCKDOWN

According to key informants from Lebanon, it is difficult to separate the impact of school closures from the country's "overlapping crises." At the start of the pandemic, the Lebanese education system was already thinly stretched. To accommodate the influx of Syrian refugee children and young people, the Lebanese government had implemented a shift system in 2016, whereby Syrians attended an afternoon school shift from 2:00-6:00 pm. The same teachers were responsible for both shifts, resulting in their becoming exhausted and burnt out. Funding shortfalls prevented full enrollment, especially among refugees; 48% of refugee learners were out of school in 2018-2019. In 2019, schools were closed due to economic crisis protests and later teacher strikes (Haddad et al., 2020).

One key informant reported that even before the COVID-19 outbreak, "huge" numbers of Lebanese children and young people have been moving from private schools to those in the public sector, as parents are increasingly unable to afford private tuition. Other semi-subsidized schools, which were associated with religious groups but supported by government funding, also closed during and after the initial economic crisis when the government stopped or slowed support.

With COVID-19 and the port explosion, Lebanese students have increasingly been given priority for enrollment in the second shift, resulting in even greater exclusion of Syrian refugee children and young people than the 2018-2019 rates. Without access to schools, Syrian children and young people had been enrolling at informal learning centers, whose programs provided a bridge to the formal education sector. With these institutions closed during COVID-19 along with formal schools, interventions were needed that focused on Syrian and the most vulnerable Lebanese children and young people, specifically those who saw a "disruption of social and peer networks and social support services, and breakdowns in caregiver routines," according to one stakeholder. INGOs distributed tablets to Syrian and some Lebanese students in the informal learning sector, which offered interactive lessons adapted to the Lebanese national curriculum. They also offered some "recreational" or "soft" PSS messages and activities, along with content aimed at protecting children and young people from online predators. Caregivers of children and young people using the programs were organized into WhatsApp groups in order to provide ongoing support and guidance; the groups also monitored online risks.



The national lockdown and school closures began in Lebanon in early March, and key informants report that schools were largely unprepared to shift to online learning. The lack of expertise or capacity in the national education system meant that “some schools are just forwarding YouTube videos,” according to one key informant. Others were able to distribute some printed materials and operate hybrid models in an attempt to provide some learning engagement for children and young people. However, these options are only stopgap measures; as one informant explained, it is impossible to achieve objectives when learning at a distance: “We can talk about attendance as a simplified objective, but no one in the world is able to meet objectives. Distance learning is not about doing what you do in the classroom and trying to do it at a distance.”

Distance learning also lacks accessibility features to encourage children and young people with disabilities to participate; even though schools had specialized departments for those learners, they lacked the expertise to migrate these services to remote modalities. Informants commented on the extreme social isolation suffered by children and young people with disabilities once schools closed; after the strides made over the decades to bring them out of their homes and into the schools, these children and young people were again “hidden” in their homes. According to one informant, “with schools closed, they lose an anchor in life.”

With the rise in extreme poverty in Lebanon (UNICEF Lebanon, 2020), many children and young people lack consistent access to online learning. All 137 children who participated in a Save the Children (2020e) survey reported having difficulties with online learning; 22% of refugee respondents did not have reliable internet, and 11% reported that their parents, due to their own lack of education, could not help them with home schooling.

### 4.3.3 CHILD PROTECTION

Of the children and young people in Lebanon who reported having difficulty continuing their studies, 90% also reported that their family could not cover basic needs like food and 50% could not afford medicine (Save the Children, 2020e). According to Plan International Lebanon (2020), poverty brought on by the economic crisis and increased inflation may prevent families from being able to access education; they may instead resort to child labor or child marriage. All key informants agreed with this prediction, with one stating that child labor rates were highest among the Syrian and Palestinian refugees. However, UNICEF Lebanon (2020) is reporting increased child labor among Lebanese as well, which they offered as evidence of the “increased vulnerability felt by all.” After an apparent decrease in child labor at the start of the lockdown, children and young people are now visibly working more on the streets. An informant commented that “families consider that their livelihood is more important than staying at home and abiding by government lockdown restrictions.” With evidence that a high number of children and young people are being sent to work in rural areas, especially Syrian refugees, another informant worried about the lack of safety measures and social distancing in the agricultural sector, which leaves working children and young people exposed to COVID-19 transmission, as well as abuse and exploitation.

Following the August explosion in the port, conditions for both Lebanese and refugee populations in the Beirut region deteriorated further. UNICEF Lebanon (2020) estimates that, due to the blast, 600,000 children and young people will require MHPSS. Moreover, shelters were needed to provide safety and access to WASH facilities amid the ongoing pandemic, especially for women, girls, and LGBTQI adults and young people. The blast also

damaged 163 public and private schools and 20 technical and vocational education training centers, which further strained enrollments for the planned school reopening; some were able to reopen instead in October. A key informant indicated that, due to the blast, schools that had planned to offer shifts to Syrian refugees when they reopened were now only accepting Lebanese children and young people.

These multiple crises have brought an increase in domestic and gender-based violence. BBC Arabic (Mahthabi, 2020) has reported a 184% increase in hotline calls related to domestic violence and online sexual blackmail; more than 41% of the incidents reported involved girls and women ages 12 to 26. It is still common for violence in the home to be treated as a private or familial matter throughout the Arab countries, where an estimated 88% of victims and survivors do not report incidents (AlAlayly, 2020). An informant from UNICEF reported a decrease in the safe identification and referral of cases among child victims in particular. Another informant commented that, with the closure of schools, “children are not visible anymore, and frontline workers are unable to work on activities that would make for easier identification” of cases of domestic or gender-based violence.

#### 4.3.4 MOVING FORWARD: FINDING STRUCTURE

As 2020 drew to a close, the challenges facing Lebanese society appeared immense. There was concern among informants and in the literature about the long-term impact of the 2020 crises. In research conducted by Terres des Hommes Italy (2020) following the blast, 87% of households surveyed reported that children and young people needed individual PSS and 41% requested immediate intervention; 78% of Syrian refugee households required PSS, almost double the need reported among Lebanese households. Participants said that relief from this specific tragedy appeared to be far off, with 73% expecting that children and young people would not resume schooling in 2020; at the time of writing, it is not yet known how many of those have been able to resume schooling.

Informants warned that educators and administrators at the schools that have been able to reopen need to be aware of the significant strain the children and young people have endured, and that wide scale provision of MHPSS needs to accompany the return to full-time learning. According to one informant, “schools should be aware that students will not perform as they used to before the closure.” For schools unable to open, or for those (largely refugee) children and young people unable to be enrolled, the quality of their education still depends on their parents and caregivers. Informants suggest that schools and education organizations view parents as “partners” and provide them with the support and training they need to take on the role of teacher within the home. This has been easier to implement in the nonformal sector, especially among Syrian refugee parents. In the meantime, Lebanon’s ministry of education needs to implement a backlog of education improvements and programs, including those that address child protection and PSS messaging.

Much improvement is needed in the child protection sector but, according to one informant, poverty is a barrier to dealing with such issues: “When the financial needs are so great, it becomes hard to...care for other needs that are more invisible.” Increased reporting has helped to make the issue of domestic violence more visible; AlAlayly (2020) writes that domestic violence, including that involving children and young people, is moving from being a private family matter to one within the public sphere. This has been helped by mass public campaigns that increase awareness of GBV and various forms of online sexual exploita-

tion, such as blackmail (Mahthabi, 2020). Additional national campaigns are working to build awareness of how to report violence against and the exploitation of children and young people. According to one informant, a significant barrier to gathering comprehensive data on child protection hotline calls at the start of the lockdown was that there was no central national hotline. UNICEF has worked with civil society organizations to ensure that there is a hotline for each of the governates, which provide triage services within the existing case management pathways.

## 4.4 CASE STUDY: RWANDA



Rwanda © Habib Kanobana, UNICEF

### 4.4.1 COUNTRY CONTEXT

In the past two decades, in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, Rwanda has made significant strides in addressing issues of poverty and gender inequality. Recent policies have expanded educational access, initially making a 9-year basic education and subsequently a 12-year basic education free, alongside specific policies which prioritize girls' education. However, increased enrollment means that teachers have as many as 70 students in one classroom, and some schools still rely on double shifts (Cameron, 2020).

Rwanda remains a nation in transition, with high rates of poverty, especially in rural regions, and ongoing social challenges such as teenage pregnancy, SGBV, and intimate partner violence. Rwanda is host to nearly 150,000 refugees and asylum seekers, including long-term refugees from the DRC and more recent arrivals from Burundi. Children and young people (under the age of 18) account for half of the total refugee and asylum-seeking population (UNICEF, 2019). The densely populated camps these people occupy lack infrastructure and often face power and water shortages (UNHCR Rwanda, 2017). Moreover, food rations were cut in 2018, an indication of the ongoing vulnerability these refugee populations face (WFP, 2018).

#### 4.4.2 IMPACT ON EDUCATION

As part of its public health response, the Government of Rwanda acted swiftly to close all schools as of March 14, 2020. With nearly 3.6 million children and young people suddenly out of school—nearly 30% of the national population—the ministry of education quickly implemented Keeping the Doors Open for Learning (Ministry of Education, 2020), a COVID-19 education response plan to ensure that learning continued from a distance. The plan's clear objective was to “protect and provide for vulnerable populations, including children with disabilities, girls and children from lower wealth quintiles” (p. 5). As a result, key education stakeholders rapidly pivoted from their standard approaches and began to deliver remote learning options, including through lessons on radio and television, official Rwanda Education Board e-learning portals and social media platforms, as well as telephone helplines and text message services.

Given that 98% of the Rwandan population uses radio as a reliable source of information, radio broadcasts were given highest priority as an “inclusive and accessible” means of disseminating lessons, especially for pupils in primary classes. According to UNICEF (2020f), as of August 2020, approximately 55% of students were engaged in radio lessons and 17% in television lessons, while 55,000 students accessed the Rwanda Education Board's e-learning portal daily. However, an inequity impact assessment of lower primary students from some of the most vulnerable and marginalized households around the country showed that only 42% had followed the radio lessons—far fewer than the national average (Kapur, 2020a). Although radio ownership was thought to be widespread, only 30% of parents surveyed owned a radio and only 6% had access to the internet.

Apart from the availability and accessibility of IT infrastructure, parental engagement to support their children's continued learning has not been guaranteed: research indicates that the proportion of parents supporting their children's learning at home actually dropped significantly during school closures, possibly indicating the multitude of challenges parents in vulnerable and marginalized households faced during a pandemic of this nature (Kapur, 2020a). A key informant in another small-scale study indicated that continued learning was “potentially supported by the pre-positioning of textbooks and the pedagogical preparation of teachers to support learning in ‘reading camps’ outside of a typical classroom environment.”

Despite the diverse distance learning modalities available and the government's rapid response to the crisis, the prolonged school closures have impacted children and young people's education in both immediate and long-term ways. Schools closed in March 2020, when the academic year had only just begun; according to a key informant, when face-to-face classes began again, many students had lost almost an entire school year. Plans for remedial action are being made, including adapted curricula and extra week-end classes. Another informant reported that national exams were moved from November 2020 to May 2021. According to an informant, while lower primary students enrolled in public schools had to wait until at least January 2021 to restart face-to-face learning, those in private institutions were cleared to begin classes several months earlier, widening an existing public-private divide. Because of the overcrowding of classrooms, social distancing has proven difficult to adhere to; more schools have returned to double-shifting, which results in fewer in-class hours for students.

### 4.4.3 IMPACT ON CHILD PROTECTION

Staying home for extended periods may have been worse for children and young people from poorer families, who generally live in more confined quarters. Restricted movement meant that family members were increasingly forced to spend time together. As one key informant reported, some children and young people may have been exposed to parental conflict or been abused themselves. While empirical data is lacking, government-mandated community volunteers locally known as Friends of the Family have reported increasing cases of family conflict since the onset of the pandemic. Helplines have received more calls than ever, another indication of a growing problem (UNICEF, 2020f).

Due to prevailing social norms related to gender and age, adolescent girls are most likely to bear the brunt of additional domestic household burdens. According to one 16-year-old girl interviewed by Save the Children, “I’m working like a domestic worker, I haven’t time to revise my studies. I clean house, I cook the food, I fetch the water, etc., if I make mistake my aunt beats me and tells me aggressive words, it makes me feel like I am worthless” (Children’s Voice Today/Save the Children, 2020, p. 8).

While widespread teenage pregnancy in Rwanda predates COVID-19 (United Nations Rwanda, 2020b), there is concern that sexual violence against children and young people is on the rise. National officials report that GBV hotlines have received “hundreds” of calls per day, including from teenage mothers who face confinement with the perpetrators responsible for their pregnancies (Iliza, 2020). Although Rwanda’s Girls’ Education Policy (MINEDUC, 2008) provides for the compulsory reentry of girls who drop out of school due to pregnancy, the extent to which this will be put into practice is not clear.

Some areas of the country, including border districts and refugee camps, have experienced longer or repeat lockdowns due to localized outbreaks of COVID-19. This could exacerbate the child protection issues faced by children and young people there, as a key informant reports. On the other hand, where lockdowns were eased, many parents returned to work while children and young people remained at home, due to ongoing school closures. Moreover, key informants indicate that many older siblings have returned to school and left younger children at home without adequate care or supervision. Child neglect may therefore have become more acute over this period. Local authorities already have reported a higher number of children and young people on the streets, including some begging for money or food (Kapur, 2020a).

With the suspension of school meal programs that provided nutritious meals daily to 83,500 students in the four poorest districts of the country, hunger and nutritional precarity are growing concerns (WFP, 2020a). Even before the pandemic, some 38% of Rwandan children under age five had stunted growth, in particular boys in rural locations and children of lower socioeconomic status (United Nations Rwanda, 2020a). The UN anticipates that 66.2% of children ages 5 to 14 will be seriously affected by nutritional deficiency. The longer schools remain closed, the more children’s nutritional outcomes will be affected—a fact the Government of Rwanda has acknowledged, in light of its recent commitment to a massive scale-up of providing school meals for as many as 2.9 million pre-primary, primary, and secondary students since September 2020 (WFP, 2020c).

Children and young people in alternative care may be among those most affected. Many of them are children and young people with disabilities who were living in residential care

facilities or who had been forced into institutions (so-called transit centers) after being found living on the streets (HRW, 2020a). These institutions were emptied at short notice when COVID-19 was first detected in Rwanda, rushing through an otherwise deliberate process of deinstitutionalization that was already under way. As a result, at least 369 children and young people were sent home with little preparation (UNICEF, 2020f). The risks they faced at home are still unknown, although actors on the ground are now beginning to make retroactive efforts at case management.

#### **4.4.4 MOVING FORWARD: COVID-19 AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE IN RWANDA**

Despite the challenges, the pandemic may have had some positive impact. According to a key informant, education actors have long advocated for a simplified primary curriculum to enhance quality basic education for all, and this looks increasingly possible in the current policy environment. In addition, planned infrastructure improvements have been accelerated as part of the pandemic response, including the rapid construction of 22,500 classrooms in a matter of months (Byishimo & Mutanganshuro, 2020)—a process that otherwise would have been completed incrementally over a number of years, a key informant reports. While even more could have been done to support children and young people with different types of disabilities, Rwanda did take its commitment to inclusive education seriously, including providing televised lessons with sign language interpretation during the school closures.

In terms of child protection, COVID-19 has also been a catalyst for action, as evidenced by the launch of a national campaign on child defilement and a national effort to address online sexual exploitation and abuse more fully. Key informants report that both threats have become increasingly prevalent during the pandemic. COVID-19 also has shown that previous investments in strengthening systems, particularly expanding and training the workforce and improving coordination between institutions, has increased resilience and enabled a rapid response to the outbreak. Given the recent crisis in neighboring DRC, some of these measures were already under way to address Ebola preparedness. While COVID-19 was initially treated as a public health crisis, the government was quick to grant the same level of priority access and authorized movement to both health and social workers, as it recognized the need for a multi-sectoral effort to both contain the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact on children and their families. This has helped to curb the effects of COVID-19 on children and young people affected by school closures.

## 4.5 CASE STUDY: SRI LANKA



Sri Lanka © Save the Children

### 4.5.1 COUNTRY CONTEXT

Open conflict ended a decade ago in Sri Lanka and the nation is now classified as middle income, but it is still a post-crisis context in which both the political and economic situation remain fraught. Occasional violent incidents still occur, as with the 2019 Islamic terrorist bombings in Colombo that targeted Christian churches and luxury hotels popular with tourists; 269 were killed in the bombings and more than 500 injured. The tourism industry shrank following the attacks, leading to a serious economic downturn. In the aftermath of the bombings, critics have argued that, even with the cessation of the 30-year civil war, Sri Lanka is post-war but not a post-conflict society (Ananthavinayagan, 2019), and tensions between ethnic and religious groups remain. COVID-19 came as an additional shock: the closure of schools and businesses and the implementation of a national curfew curtailed economic progress, intensified the deprivation of already marginalized groups, and increased poverty across all groups, thus posing serious risks to social stability and ongoing peace.

### 4.5.2 EDUCATION UNDER COVID-19

All schools in Sri Lanka were suddenly closed on March 12, 2020, with a staggered re-opening, according to level, in June. When COVID-19 cases increased in July and October, the government ordered additional shorter-term closures; other local lockdowns and school closures were instituted in regions where cases spiked again. One key informant compared the COVID-19 outbreak in Sri Lanka to the 2019 bombings, as schools in areas affected by the bombings were also closed for two weeks or longer. According to the informant, both crises caused a sense of panic and a “suspension of normalcy” that were heightened by school closures (UNESCO, 2020i), mixed messages from public figures, and a response that did not adequately rely on civil society and UN actors.



At the start of the current school closures, informants reported that the ministry of education prioritized remote learning opportunities for students who were due to sit for national exams, including the grade 5 and O-Level exams, and the advanced-level exams that students take to become eligible for university. As the pandemic progressed, lessons for non-exam grades were made increasingly available, with some hosted on the National Institute of Education website and broadcast via television and radio. Some teachers sent packets of materials digitally via WhatsApp and Viber (Ministry of Education Sri Lanka & UNICEF, 2020). Informants also spoke of some printed materials being distributed to young children in grades 1-2. No data were gathered to determine the effectiveness or uptake of any of these materials. As a case in point, access was clearly a problem for the children of Tamil tea pickers on plantations, one of the most impoverished groups in Sri Lanka. Amnesty International (2020) reported that just 21% of children and young people on the plantations had access to the internet, and unstable power connections further compounded their access to education materials.

Two critical areas were neglected in Sri Lanka's COVID-19 education response strategy: special needs students and preschoolers. In a rapid assessment conducted by the ministry of education and UNICEF (2020), 76% of caregivers of children and young people with special needs stated that they lacked the capacity to support their children's needs. Preschool, which is a key period for stimulation and learning development, is primarily an informal and privately managed sector in Sri Lanka. Preschools closed during the lockdowns, and those operating the preschools took other jobs out of economic need; this created potential problems for the availability of preschools in the coming year. Moreover, parents of young children and toddlers received very little support or guidance during the lockdowns, other than recommendations for basic hygiene.

Exams went ahead as scheduled in October and November 2020, even amid the ongoing outbreaks and local lockdowns. Some exam schedules were disrupted when examiners tested positive for COVID-19 and entire student cohorts went into quarantine (Associated Press, 2020); news agencies (EconomyNext, 2020) reported that the pressure of sitting for exams during a pandemic increased the stress students experienced.

### 4.5.3 IMPACT ON CHILD PROTECTION

As with other contexts worldwide, Sri Lankan child protection authorities and organizations lack concrete data to speak to the risks being exacerbated during COVID-19 but, according to one informant, "from field reports and reporting from other partners, we know that the incidents are there." Multiple informants cited increasing poverty, food insecurity, parental stress, and negative coping mechanisms (such as alcohol consumption) as potential drivers of child protection incidents. Moreover, the economic situation is quickly worsening; in a World Vision Lanka (2020) survey of 2,190 families, 44% of respondents said they had lost their jobs and 88% reported a significant drop in their income.

One informant spoke to the changes in family dynamics, as parents—especially fathers—struggled to adjust to the challenge of round-the-clock child supervision and support brought on by home confinement and curfews. Hospitals and healthcare professionals reported serious increases in GBV and intimate partner violence (Tegal & Galappatti, 2020). The National Child Protection Authority received an increasing number of complaints about child cruelty, and one stakeholder reported a 40% increase



in calls to the national hotline for corporal punishment. A key informant reports that cases of violence within the home are often met with a limited response: the national government does not consider responding to violence against women and children an “essential” service, so lockdown measures prevent frontline responders from conducting site visits and/or providing confidential and effective distance-based services. Where cases of abuse were identified, children and young people were asked to return home, often to their abusers, due to limited alternative care options. There also were reports of police being unwilling to respond to complaints of domestic violence because of the pandemic—they did not consider such cases a part of the official pandemic response and thus they ignored them (Tegal & Galappatti, 2020).

In addition to exposing children and young people to violence, a key informant reported that economic difficulties arising from COVID-19 are contributing to increased levels of child labor and child trafficking, although no explicit data are yet available. Child labor is usually centered in the international tourism sector but, as an informant reported, as local tourism has picked up there are increasing reports of children and young people being put to work in the sector so companies can reduce their expenses and offer cheap, competitive rates for domestic tourists. Sri Lanka previously made significant strides in reducing child labor, especially around WFCL, which dropped from more than 900,000 working children and young people in 1999 to a low of 103,704 in 2016; this lower number still represented as much as 2.3% of the country’s child population (ILO, 2016). Children and young people from tea plantation families are especially at risk of dropping out of school and entering the labor market (Amnesty International, 2020). Clearly, if the nation is to meet its target of 0% child labor by 2022, a stronger government response is needed (“40,000 children working,” 2019).

#### **4.5.4. LOOKING AHEAD: THE NEED FOR LEADERSHIP AND EVIDENCE**

At the end of 2020, as localized lockdowns and school closures continued, there was still great uncertainty in Sri Lanka. Informants noted that the education and child protection sectors would benefit from national strategies. One informant called for a clear “mapping” of schools within a district to understand their distinct features or challenges, such as the forms of technology available: “There needs to be school mapping to understand who has access and what that access looks like.” With these types of data, the government would be better able to target areas of need and focus on deploying resources to the most marginalized groups, such as Tamil tea picker families. Informants also noted the need for better interaction between the ministries and the government, which indicated that the INGOs were often better positioned and networked to provide advice and expertise.

# 5. Moving Forward

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## 5.1 CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS: RETURNING TO SCHOOL—OR NOT

As both the literature review and case studies demonstrate, **school closures come at an enormous cost to children and young people.** The combined losses of academic learning and formal nutrition, health, and MHPSS services, and the informal aspects of being protected and socially engaged have seriously affected the protection and well-being of children and young people. This has already been evident during the pandemic, and there are strong indicators that these effects will continue long after the pandemic is over. This is particularly true for children and young people in crisis-affected or other vulnerable contexts, and/or who have other, often intersecting vulnerabilities. Research from previous epidemics has highlighted not only the negative psychological effects of being quarantined (Brooks et al., 2020) but also the negative impact the lockdown-related stress and trauma have on children's and young people's ability to learn once face-to-face schooling begins again (Lee, 2020).

Lessons from the past show that, when schools are closed and learning is disrupted during longer-term crises, children and young people are unlikely to restart their schooling when the crisis has passed (UNESCO, 2020b). Girls in particular are less likely to return to school once they leave, often because of early marriage, pregnancy, or the need to work (Save the Children, 2020d). Globally, an estimated ten million children and young people will not return to school as countries return to more normal operations (Save the Children, 2020g). As emerging evidence indicates, some parents and caregivers may be unwilling or unable to send children and young people back to school as closures lift, due to worsened poverty and the need for financial support; this was demonstrated during the EVD-related school closures in West Africa. The highest dropout rates there were among children from the poorest households in Guinea and Sierra Leone; two years after the schools reopened, an additional 22,000 more children and young people remained out of school than would have been expected before the outbreak (Smith, 2020). In 2020, 73% of the refugees and IDPs who responded to the NRC (2020) survey reported that the current economic situation would prevent them from sending their children back to school.

## 5.2 RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS: IN THE IMMEDIATE AND LONG TERM

A review of available literature and the country case studies above provide extensive evidence of the consequences of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. It supports the argument that reopening schools and future school closures need to carefully balance public health risks with the welfare of children and young people (INEE & ACPHA, 2020).

Moving forward, to support the **response to and recovery** from the current pandemic and to help build **resilience and preparedness** for future infectious disease outbreaks, we offer the following detailed recommendations for policymakers and practitioners at the government, sector, and school levels; they stem directly from existing and emergent evidence.

### 5.2.1. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

#### Reach out to marginalized and less visible groups.

As schools reopen, both education and child protection actors must make a concerted effort to **identify and re-enroll children and young people who face the most serious risks**, including those who were already out of school when the pandemic began.

#### At the government level:

- Undertake research to identify at-risk groups and formulate programming that specifically targets those groups.
- Address pre-existing legislative and normative gender gaps that will likely inhibit a return to school. For example, pregnancy should not result in girls' exclusion; providing childcare will encourage adolescent mothers to continue their schooling.
- Provide additional funding for services and amenities that will incentivize re-enrollment. For example, the Rwandan government has invested in providing school meals for the entire student population and menstrual kits for girls.
- Deploy public campaigns that promote the return to school and focus specifically on at-risk groups, including girls, and children and young people with disabilities.

#### At the sector level:

- Collaborate between sectors to ensure that at-risk groups, including children and young people who were out of school prior to the pandemic, are identified and enrolled in school, and that they can access support services to ensure that they continue to attend.

#### At the school level:

- Build school-community partnerships to disseminate information about the reopening of schools and the availability of school-based services.

- Collaborate with community-based actors and the children and young people themselves to jointly identify and support the enrollment and retention of at-risk children and young people in the local area.

### **As schools reopen, ensure access for all and prioritize well-being.**

Given extensive concerns about learning loss, the World Bank (2020c), ILO, and UNICEF (2020) have emphasized that learning must be prioritized as children and young people return to school. They call for remedial, “catch-up,” and accelerated classes to help children and young people realign with their curricular goals. Systems have thus prioritized the face-to-face return of certain student groups, such as those preparing for national exams. However, given the extent of overlapping protection concerns during the pandemic, there is a pressing need to both **ensure access for all and prioritize well-being over academic achievement**.

#### **At the government level:**

- Ensure adequate **funding of school personnel** so that teachers and administrators receive timely and commensurate compensation for their work.
- Emphasize **remedial and catch-up classes** that will help children and young people make up for lost learning during school closures, rather than pushing for a rapid realignment with the existing curriculum.

#### **At the school level:**

- **Prioritize access for all**, even if adhering to social distancing and other safety measures requires shorter school days or double shifts.
- **Be attentive to infection prevention and control measures, especially for children and young people with disabilities.** As some learners with disabilities may need more physical contact with their environment—such as those with mobility issues touching walls or those who are visually impaired touching objects—or with their caregivers and assistants, provision must be made for frequent disinfecting, handwashing, and adequate personal protective equipment (Humanity and Inclusion, 2020a).
- For all learners, **prioritize a gradual return to “learning as usual”** in recognition of the many physical, emotional, psychological, and social stressors children and young people confronted during the pandemic. Also provide support for psychosocial needs and social and emotional readjustment to the classroom environment.

## 5.2.2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE

### Review curriculum and learning materials for relevance.

Given that children and young people encountered difficulties in using existing school materials for at-home learning (Chabbott & Sinclair, 2020; Gordon et al., 2020; Kapur, 2020a), especially when they lacked parental support, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for **a serious re-thinking of the relevance of existing curricular content, materials, and modalities in the 21st century.**

#### At the government level:

- Utilize **research** to identify fit-for-purpose distance learning options.
- Draft and **adopt minimum standards for online and blended learning.**
- To ensure that new and existing online platforms are user-friendly, accessible to children and young people with a variety of disabilities, and of high quality, continue to **invest in and develop online learning**, including investing in technological devices and the development of online platforms and materials.
- Provide better **support for equitable distance learning offerings** and improve existing materials for distribution via television, radio, and SMS.
- Review **existing textbooks and other printed learning materials** to ensure that content, form, and language are accessible for all learners, especially in learning situations where no teacher or educator is present.
- Integrate messages around **child protection** (including **online safety**) into existing curricula, teacher training programs, and materials on new and existing distance learning platforms.
- **Engage teachers** in the textbook and curriculum review and revision process and work with teacher groups to ensure that adequate and ongoing training and support are provided for the implementation of blended or virtual learning and any revised materials.

#### At the sector level:

- Provide **ongoing training and strengthen the capacity of teachers and school administrators**, and of parents and caregivers, to support children's and young people's at-home learning, and their MHPSS needs.

#### At the school level:

- Integrate messages regarding **child protection and online safety** into school programming and classroom lessons.
- Provide **distance learning options** for children and young people with disabilities who are unable to rejoin face-to-face schooling due to health concerns, **along with support for their caregivers.** This will allow these children and young people to continue to engage with learning and the classroom environment.

## Build back better.

The findings from this report provide a template for governments to “build back better” and strengthen existing systems to mitigate the impact of future crises and ensure that child protection and education sectors are working in sync.

### At the government level:

- Designate child protection services and response to reports of abuse, violence, neglect, and exploitation as **essential aspects** of the infectious disease response.
- Facilitate the **ongoing integration** of the child protection and education sectors.
- Devise **intentional, targeted programming** that uses our research findings to ensure the protection and well-being of children and young people, both at home and in their communities.
- **Invest in facilities and enact policies that enable safe schooling during infectious disease outbreaks**, including improving WASH facilities, providing personal protective equipment for teachers and students, and mandating smaller class sizes.

### At the sector, community, and school level:

- Through collaboration between sectors, communities, and schools, **provide ongoing sensitization and support for parents** in order to:
  - understand the **types of risks** children and young people may encounter outside of school and emphasize the importance of attending school to mitigate potential risks;
  - focus on the **forms of assistance and support** that children and young people need when learning from home; and
  - help provide explicit **support for children’s and young people’s social, emotional, and MHPSS needs**, and provide coping strategies for parents and children alike.

## Disaggregated Data and Additional Research

**Ongoing research is required:** this report indicates numerous areas where data on specific groups are not available or have not been disaggregated. For response and recovery, and the ongoing development of resilient education and child protection systems, there is a strong need for **increased research around at-risk groups and intersecting factors that exacerbate risks**. Data should be disaggregated to account not only for sex and age but also sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, nationality, legal status in the country they are in, household composition, and parents’ education and socioeconomic status.

Further, in recognition of the mutually reinforcing relationship between education and child protection, there is an ongoing need for **collaboration between the child protection and education sectors**. Integrating child protection and education minimum standards, policies, and programs can **help to make the most of** the existing, often strained resources in crisis-affected contexts (ACPHA, 2018) in recognition of shared goals.

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