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School reopening

Introduction

As a preventive measure to curb the further spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools, universities and other education institutions have closed in most countries, affecting almost 90% of the global student population. While Member States work to ensure the continuity of learning through alternative delivery modalities, in parallel, they need to start anticipating and preparing for school reopening.

Ministries of Education (MOEs), in consultation with Ministries of Health, Social Affairs and other key public and private institutions, are in charge of planning for school reopening, prioritizing the safety and protection of learners, teachers and other personnel, as well as their health - physical, mental and psychosocial, well-being and social relationships. Back-to-school strategies need to focus on assessing and ensuring the readiness of the education system for school reopening; the continuity of learning; and, system resilience to anticipate and deal with future crises. MOEs will also need to anticipate and prepare for additional challenges resulting from the direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19 and prolonged social isolation, on both the education system and on the school community. These include increased risk of dropout, the exacerbation of existing and new inequalities, or the loss of education personnel.

Despite the great challenges presented by this crisis, the situation also offers the opportunity to rethink the overall purpose, role, content and delivery of education in the long term, and prepare education systems to deal with current and future crises through comprehensive and inter-sectoral approaches and by tapping into collective experience and practices from around the world.

Defining the topic and related key issues

Key questions around school reopening concern timing, conditions and processes. Timing will depend on the status and evolution of the pandemic and will be determined in each country based on political decisions, with advice from health experts and established monitoring mechanisms. The unpredictability of the length of the closure period poses specific challenges and requires flexible scenario planning. UNESCO has been monitoring the situation globally and notes that most MOEs are

planning for either partial reopening (e.g. China), dispersal re-opening (different grades on different days) or remaining closed until further notice.

Contingency plans for school reopening can be based on contextual factors, as in some countries the closure period coincides, for example, with the beginning of the school year, in others with the end, the examination period, or school holidays. MOEs need to prioritize reopening strategies based on the status of their school calendar, their education objectives and priorities.

While recognizing that the situation varies across different geographical, sociocultural, economic or other contexts, strategies to consider with relation to school reopening are grouped around three overarching areas, to assess and ensure:

1. **System readiness**: assessing the availability of people, infrastructure, resources and capacity to resume functions;

2. **Continuity of learning**: ensuring learning resumes and continues as smoothly as possible after the interruption; and

3. **System resilience**: building and reinforcing the preparedness of the education system to anticipate, respond to and mitigate the effects of current and future crises.

An overarching priority will be the overall health and well-being of the school population (students, teachers, and other personnel). This should include approaches to deal with post-traumatic stress caused by COVID-19, and the resulting social isolation and confinement.

Other major issues to consider include a heightened risk of school dropout, as observed during past crises, and increased inequalities, often the result of unequal access to alternative learning delivery methods. In certain contexts, students may also be affected by lack of nutrition, or exposure to violence, displacement, child labour and other adverse conditions, with girls and women being particularly vulnerable. Special attention must also be given to students from vulnerable backgrounds, including those living in poverty, geographically remote areas or urban slums, from ethnic minorities, migrants and refugees, and children with disabilities.

Lessons from past practices and current crisis

- Past recovery responses highlight the need to prepare as soon as possible for school reopening, to ensure that appropriate strategies are defined and schools are ready to operate once confinement measures end.
- Communication is key to building trust among stakeholders and partners. It is therefore important to ensure effective communication channels, within the school community, between the government and other education authorities and schools.
- The socio-economic impact of the pandemic on families and the wider community, and its effect on education must be considered. For example, school dropout or transfers increase during crises as families lose income, are forced to leave the affected areas or resort to negative coping mechanisms such as child labour; inequalities are exacerbated due to lack of social services, health, nutrition and protection; female vulnerability is exacerbated, gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual and domestic violence rises, together with incidences of early marriage and pregnancy.
- Community engagement and awareness-raising should be prioritized in back-to-school strategies to ensure higher return rates. In post-Ebola Sierra Leone, communication around improved school hygiene practices were effective in encouraging parents to send their children back to school upon reopening.
- In African countries hit by the Ebola crisis, adjusting learning priorities was a key strategy to ensure curriculum is covered in a shorter academic year. Such approaches should be initiated as soon as

possible and be part of MOE's planning efforts for school reopening.

- Capitalize on the momentum of using ICT to assist learning and keep up with technology after the crisis. However, caution must be exercised, in order to avoid potential inequities that may result from these alternative education delivery approaches.
- School preparedness to deal with infections should be incorporated into education sector planning, as it will be key to mitigate the impact of potential future disease outbreaks.
- Strengthen the leadership and meaningful participation of women and girls in all decision-making processes to address the COVID-19 outbreak. During the Ebola crisis, women were less likely than men to have power in decision making around the outbreak, and their needs were largely unmet.

Key messages and practical tips for designing policy interventions

Below are practical issues related to school reopening that Ministries of Education need to consider and address, primarily in the immediate, short and medium-term, but also in the long-term. The list is not exhaustive and can be considered and complemented by other appropriate actions based on local contexts.

Immediate-term action: assessing and ensuring education system readiness

➢ **Preparing for school reopening:**

- **Coordinate:** Determine who will manage the post-crisis situation, and how, looking at staff, modalities, and processes. This includes deciding when schools reopen, how much in advance, under which conditions and measures, and how to inform students, parents and caregivers, teachers and other personnel. Work through existing crisis management teams and functions, to ensure a smooth transition from remote learning to classroom learning. Manage governance issues, especially in the context of partner engagement, for example with the private sector, and philanthropic institutions, ensure community participation and improve accountability.
- **Plan:** Carry out a situation analysis to determine the effects of the pandemic on education, for example the health and safety of the school population, loss of instructional time, learning outcomes, missed exams, inequalities and dropout from a gender lens, using sex-disaggregated data and reviewing policies that may create barriers to school return, including those that prevent pregnant girls or adolescent mothers attending schools. Prepare contingency plans at school, district, regional and national levels, including priority setting and strategy development, monitoring, and financing. Consult with key stakeholders and ensure gender expertise in response teams and task forces. Key actions for rapid assessment are presented below.
- **Determine strategies and actions**, both at national and school level, to mitigate impact and address immediate gaps, in consultation with concerned education stakeholders and other relevant sectors:
  - Ensure a smooth transition from distance learning platforms to classroom delivery.
  - Adjust curriculum and delivery modalities to enable the meeting of key learning objectives for the school year, and to promote the use of more practical approaches to learning such as project-based learning.
  - Rearrange the school calendar based on curricular priorities for each level.
  - Implement targeted accelerated learning/remedial/catchup programmes or shorten teaching periods.
  - Adapt the examination/evaluation calendar and content based on a back-to-school learning assessment. This may necessitate the recruitment of volunteer teachers.
  - Ensure professional support is provided to teachers who need to adapt their teaching approaches in a flexible way. For instance, delivering a compressed curriculum.
  - Train teachers and students on alternative teaching and learning approaches, before, during and after crisis, in consultation with teacher-training institutions.

- Identify strategies and interventions to address learning gaps, especially among vulnerable groups, and to mitigate inequalities that might have been created or exacerbated during confinement. This may include supplementary teaching, tutoring, and extra-curricular non-formal learning activities.
- Determine what to assess. For example, in Costa Rica evaluation will be formative, not related to grades, as ideal and equal learning opportunities could not be ensured for all students during school closure.

- **Prioritize**: Depending on the context, this may include focusing on high-stake examinations, such as those determining entrance to higher education institutions, or graduation certificates.

Rapid assessment of infrastructures, human, technical, and financial resources
- Education personnel: availability, health status, motivation, etc. Foresee redeployment in case of loss or mobility as teachers may leave the affected areas, especially if they do not have fixed contracts.
- Status of school infrastructure including school availability, potential need for rehabilitation works and resources, including disinfection. This would be particularly necessary in cases where schools were used for other purposes during the closure period.
- Status of school health environment: availability of sanitation facilities, separate for girls and boys; and health equipment such as clean water, soap, sanitizers, hand washing facilities, and thermometers.
- Availability and coordination of resources and modalities to offer psycho-social support. For example, qualified doctors and other specialists such as psychologists, school counselors, and social workers. In the absence of specialists, focal points need to be identified, noting that in this case pre-training will be necessary. Other options might include collaborating with relevant local universities/institutions.
- Sourcing and distribution of food supplies for school feeding programmes.
- Overall financial impact and status of school financing.

Short-medium-term actions: resuming school function and ensuring continuity of learning

➢ **Ensuring students, teachers, administrative and other staff are ready to resume teaching and learning**

Health support
- Ensure security and safety of students at, on the way to, and from school to minimize the risk of new infections.
- Assess impact of school closure and confinement on the health and well-being of the entire education community, including students, teachers and other personnel. This might require strengthening the monitoring capacity of MOEs. For example, by expanding EMIS by developing a tracking/reporting system or introducing Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) for monitoring the health status of staff and students.
- Partner with community and health personnel for systematic monitoring of the health status of the students and staff, including SOPs, alert system in case of infection or illness, and actions to be taken in case of new infections.
- Promote health education, implement school health protocols, diffuse age and language-appropriate messages around hand washing, hygiene, prevention at school and in the classroom.
- Care for mental health and socio-emotional well-being. For example, offer psychosocial support to students and education personnel to deal with post-traumatic stress, coordinate the work of pre-identified psychologists, counselors, social workers or focal points.
- Assess and address female vulnerability, GBV, including sexual and domestic violence, and the increased risk of early marriage and pregnancy.
- Communicate with the wider community, consult with and support parents and caretakers to support children.
- Deal with prejudice and stigma, which in certain cultures persist even after recovery.

Academic support

- Ensure teacher coordination and motivation, and deal with the risk of attrition.
- Provide teacher professional development, in collaboration with teacher training institutions - providing distant learning, options for curriculum adaptation, peer learning, etc.
- Monitor student returns using sex-disaggregated data, and ensure compliance with the provisions of compulsory education, identifying and targeting vulnerable groups and those at risk of drop out.
- Ensure student motivation, and address disengagement and risk of dropout, which increases in emergency situations. Identify those at risk of exclusion and not returning to school, and consider a Back-to-School Campaign. If and where necessary, consider programmes to address stigma and direct community mobilization, waiving school fees, broadening the scope of school feeding programmes, and providing targeted support to vulnerable groups.
- Assess the consequences of school closure on curriculum execution and consider adjustment options.
- Assess impact on learning and identify learning gaps among students, focusing on vulnerable groups.
- Implement appropriate remedial action and accelerated learning strategies as pre-planned.
- Ensure quality, equality and inclusion.
- Identify inequalities, considering disparities among students, schools, households or regions.
- Recognize and address female vulnerability.
- Consider qualifications assurance and certification, focusing on priority/time-sensitive group, such as graduates transitioning to higher levels of education requiring entrance exams, graduates' transition to the world of work, and those requiring exam-based certification.
- Monitor the situation, documenting lessons learned at all levels, from school to national levels, to inform further action. This may concern teaching and learning processes, governance and management of schools, strengthening education community, and promoting the continuity of the exchange of experiences.
- Develop national, district and school risk-reduction plans that focus on the range of risks school communities are confronted with.

Long-term actions: education system resilience

- Document lessons learned to inform future decision-making and practice. For example, for crisis preparedness and incorporation into education planning and costing, with a gender-sensitive lens.
- Rethink the purpose, content and delivery of education and learning, and consider possible reforms.
- Rethink the role of schools: building knowledge, skills and attitudes, social function, and promoting health and well-being.
- Revise and develop policies and guidelines, for example on distance learning.
- Strengthen distance learning, including both delivery and content development.
- Set implementation, coordination and monitoring arrangements and communication during and after crises.
- Reconsider delivery modalities. For example, distance education, both on and off-line, could be part of mainstream approaches. This should be accompanied by teacher and student training, and a preparedness to use alternative teaching and learning approaches, before, during and after crisis.
- Ensure adequate resources are allocated to meeting school hygiene standards.
- Enable peer learning: create platforms for experience sharing, national, regional and international.
- Review and ensure Education in Emergencies (EiE) is included in national education policies and plans, with specific and clear strategies**.**

Practical Tips:

✓ Acknowledge the unprecedented magnitude and global nature of the crisis.
✓ Prioritize collaboration and working in partnerships, within and across countries and consult with key education and other concerned stakeholders.
✓ Promote multi-sectoral collaboration, for example among sectors such as education and health, as well as the social sector, private sector, and community.
✓ Promote and facilitate peer-learning, sharing of experience, information, challenges, lessons learned, but also solutions and ideas. If there are group discussions, as well as other actions in the short term to promote the solidarity and understanding between the educational community members, this should be cultivated in the mid-term and long term.
✓ Strengthen communities of practice for teachers.
✓ Monitor the evolving nature of the situation constantly. This may be done using crowd-based monitoring, cloud-based data and information sharing.
✓ Learn from past experience but also accept that sometimes learning by doing might be the only option.

Key references

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