Education Sector

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Crisis-sensitive educational planning

Introduction

In light of the far-reaching consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on education systems around the world, with 89% of the world's student population affected by COVID-19 school closures as of 1 April 2020, governments and partner organizations have ramped up efforts to facilitate the continuity of learning[1]. It is important to acknowledge that the current crisis will have long-lasting consequences for education systems in terms of access, quality, equity and management, which are likely to persist beyond the pandemic. Furthermore, risks of disasters, conflict and violence, are becoming more frequent, pointing towards the increased need to strengthen risk reduction capacities in the education sectors, including through prevention, preparedness and mitigation activities.

Therefore, while recognizing the urgency of immediate action to minimize educational disruption, UNESCO advocates for rapid response efforts to be underpinned by a mid- and longer-term, multi-risk and sustainability-oriented approach. Initiatives that are put in place as part of an immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic should ideally build on and strengthen local strategies to sustain responsiveness and engagement at all levels of the education system.

[1] https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse

In this way, rapid response measures can contribute to reinforcing the resilience of national education systems, and supporting the long-term education vision of national authorities.

Defining the topic and related key issues

While many countries struck by the COVID-19 crisis may require international support to ensure educational continuity for all learners and to protect and maintain the welfare of the education workforce during the current emergency, governments, through their Ministries of Education (MoEs), remain responsible for education provision. Rapid response programmes that aim to ensure continuity of education provision should align with MoE priorities and long-term activities. Supporting MoEs in institutionalizing crisis risk reduction and management into education planning processes can help MoEs in better leading the planning and delivery of education before, during, and after a crisis, as well as in preparing for and mitigating the impacts of the crisis. This approach is referred to as 'crisis-sensitive planning'.

Lessons from past practices and current crisis

UNESCO's experience providing technical support to education authorities for crisis-sensitive planning has highlighted that such an approach should be prioritized to ensure that education systems are more resilient, able to respond and better prepared to address future crises. This will be even more important as countries respond to this global pandemic, and in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Crisis-sensitive planning in the education sector involves **analysing existing and potential crisis risks**, including those related to other key sectors such as health, and understanding the two-way interaction between these risks and education to develop strategies that respond appropriately. For example, in the context of COVID-19, children's lack of familiarity with appropriate hygiene techniques or resistance to abiding by social distancing rules may exacerbate the spread of the virus. However, community-based life-saving messaging, the use of education as a vehicle to spread public health information, and investing in education as a way to foster innovation and skills that will be needed to address forthcoming crisis may prove useful to mitigate these risks. Crisis-sensitive planning therefore contributes to minimizing the negative impacts of risks on education service delivery and maximizing the positive impacts of education policies and programming on preventing future crises, including global health crises and pandemics.

Crisis-sensitive planning also entails **analysing capacities and existing resources for risk reduction** and the emergency response in the education sector. In the context of COVID-19, this can include a review of existing distance and open learning programmes and available resources to expand the delivery and accessibility of such programmes. It is also important to understand the capacities of teachers, school leaders and other education personnel as they support students in navigating the world of distance and remote learning, often without sufficient training, support and resources.

To reduce risks of conflict and violence, crisis-sensitive planning also requires **identifying and overcoming patterns of inequity and exclusion in education**, as well as harmful cultural and social practices. This is particularly important in the current pandemic context, as confinement and school closures may have longer-term consequences on the most vulnerable and marginalized populations, exacerbating already-existing disparities within the education system. Crisis-sensitive planning in the context of COVID-19 should pay particular attention to equity, for example by tackling the digital divide and ensuring inclusive and gender-responsive learning solutions are put in place. Reflecting on specific impacts of school closures on girls, internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, learners in crisis-affected contexts and other vulnerable groups and providing adapted solutions is also key. Without reaching the furthest first, gains made on the inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable groups into national education systems face regression.

Moreover, crisis-sensitive educational planning aims to **bring together all education actors, from both humanitarian and development perspectives**, as they work to address the particular and complex set of challenges posed by the current pandemic. This includes ensuring complementarities and avoiding duplication to deliver an effective and sustainable education response at multiple levels, including regional, district, community, and school levels.

Key messages and practical tips for designing policy and programmes

In the short-term, **ensure coordinated planning across sectors, government, and humanitarian and development partners** to effectively respond to the crisis.

- Initial efforts to respond to COVID-19 should be **led and coordinated by governments**, in alignment with COVID-19 national response plans, including through cross-sectoral approaches, notably between the education, health and child protection sectors. Government leadership should be ensured at national, regional, and district levels, building on existing coordination mechanisms, where possible.

- Any measure undertaken in the education sector should **be aligned with national priorities at both central and decentralized levels** in order to improve the sustainability of efforts. More specifically, any remote learning solution put in place should build on existing capacities and be implemented in close coordination with national and sub-national education authorities, including school leaders and teachers themselves. In some contexts, schools are best placed to determine existing capacities and to suggest appropriate remote learning strategies. Planning in the context of COVID-19 requires coordinating and engaging teachers and communities to identify effective strategies for remote learning, and communicating with all stakeholders involved to share ideas and provide motivation and life-saving information. It also involves the identification of potential context-specific barriers to such strategies based on gender, language, location, ability and other parameters to ensure that responses do not reproduce or perpetuate discriminatory practices and inequalities. Such efforts should help lay the foundation for functional, resilient national education systems in the longer-term.

- The current global health crisis calls for strong partnerships and collaborations to be in place to achieve, in practice, the humanitarian-development nexus in the education sector, by **bridging the gap between humanitarian and development interventions**. This entails improved coordination among partners to ensure that primary system needs do not become secondary concerns due to COVID-19. Countries that are already struggling to ensure education provision need ongoing support to be maintained, in addition to specific efforts dedicated to COVID-19 response. Partners should respond to short-term needs with longer term programmes addressing systemic vulnerabilities. Development and humanitarian actors should collaborate and develop joint efforts to address needs in education, building on mutual strengths and comparative advantages For example, this may mean that development partners provide technical expertise and harness operational and logistic capacities of humanitarian actors, especially for distance or self-learning.

- Efforts to respond to COVID-19 should also include **coordinated planning for back-to-school campaigns** and strategies, including accelerated learning programmes specifically targeting vulnerable groups, to address existing and increasing inequalities by preventing drop out.

In the medium to long-term, **institutionalize crisis risk reduction and management** within the education sector. Specifically, MoEs at national and sub-national levels can prevent, prepare for and mitigate crisis, including pandemics, by:

- **Analysing impacts of crisis risks on education**, including for displaced and marginalized populations, as part of education sector analyses and assessments. Such analysis should be

grounded in gender analyses, considering gendered roles, risks, responsibilities, and social norms. This includes ensuring that mitigation and response measures address women's and girls' caregiving burdens and heightened risks of gender-based violence and other adverse impacts.

- Designing **crisis-sensitive educational policies and programmes** that aim to reduce risks, strengthen preparedness and response capacities at individual, school, community, national and sub-national MoE and government level, including through contingency planning based on different scenarios for length of school closures, and expecting timing of school reopening.

  o **Contingency plans for the education sector at all levels** (from central to school level) can help ensure education continuity and the safety and security of learners, teachers and education infrastructure. Such plans can be developed during an ongoing crisis, but should, ideally, be developed before crises occur.

  o Contingency plans will be a key element to prepare for school reopening in the current COVID-19 crisis. Once schools reopen, and lessons resume, detailed guidance should be in place to outline how the education sector will respond at all levels to a specific emerging or anticipated crisis, prior to its occurrence. This may include, for example, comprehensive standard operating procedures, protocols, and lines of decision-making and communication flow-charts, within the MoE as well as between the MoE and partners.

  o Contingency planning processes should also include resources to better understand the implications of public health emergencies/disease outbreaks on different population groups, so that preparedness and response plans can mitigate harm to women, girls, and other vulnerable groups.

- Ensuring **dedicated risk management units within the MoE** are equipped to effectively steer, plan and coordinate the risk reduction efforts including emergency response initiatives in the education sector, in collaboration with Education Clusters or EiE working groups.

- Developing and **integrating crisis-sensitive data collection tools and analysis into existing education information systems** to ensure readily available and reliable data on the effects of crisis and the resulting needs of schools, teachers and learners, with the ultimate goal of strengthening prevention and mitigation capacities of the education system.

- Developing **cost and financing frameworks for crisis-sensitive education sector plans**, allowing for more predictable and equitable funding in crisis situations. These frameworks should include sustainable funding for education workforce salaries.

- Ensuring **education is addressed in national disaster management plans**.

Key references

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About UNESCO Education Sector´s Issue Notes

UNESCO Education Sector's issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely: Health and wellbeing; Continuity of learning and teaching; Gender equity and equality; Teaching and learning; Higher education and TVET; Education and culture; Education policy and planning; Vulnerable populations, as well as Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present note was developed by UNESCO International Institute for Education Planning, Section of Education for Migration, Displacement and Emergencies & Section of Education Policy.

Stay in touch

UNESCO's COVID-19 Education Response

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