



Save the Children

SAVE OUR **EDUCATION** IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

PROTECT EVERY CHILD'S RIGHT TO LEARN IN
THE COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

Introduction



KEY FIGURES:

- Among the 12 countries in the world in 'extreme risk' of falling behind in their progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), 09 are from WCA due to COVID-19.
- **2 million children** were out of school due to insecurity before COVID-19,
- **128 million children** from pre-primary to secondary school are **out of School** due to COVID-19
- **1/5 of children** aged 6-11 years are out of school in normal times.
- **23 billion** US dollars in education funding deficit could result from pandemic economic impact in low- and middle-income countries
- **4.2 million people** are currently displaced in the Sahel, 60% of which are children.
- **1.2 million** are internally displaced and refugees, including 670 000 children.

In early April, an estimated 128 million children in West and Central Africa (WCA) were out of school as one of the collateral consequences of governments' response to halt the spread of the COVID 19' virus. Over this period, some countries have been demonstrating great leadership in providing continuous learning for children while schools remained closed. However, in Sub-Saharan Africa, 89 per cent of learners do not have access to household computers, 82% lack internet access and around 28 million learners live in locations not served by mobile networks . In this context, it is likely that the most marginalized girls and boys are struggling to access distance education, and are not getting the support they need to continue learning.

For West and Central Africa, this pandemic has come on top of an existing learning crisis. Before the pandemic, the region already had the highest rate of education exclusion, with more than one-fifth of children aged 6-11 years out of school in normal times. Moreover, in June 2019, over 9,290 schools were already closed due to insecurity, affecting 2 million children and 44,000 teachers. In addition, across the region, 670 000 forcibly displaced people are living in overcrowded, under-resourced refugee and internal displacement sites with limited access to learning opportunities. Many national education systems in WCA already on a day to day basis face considerable challenges as a result of conflict and displacement, environmental emergencies and a lack of resources to respond to this structural challenge.

In this context, COVID-19 further compounds these challenges and will result in millions more children being denied their basic right to learn. Countries are under huge pressure to respond to this pandemic, putting the already insufficient education budget at risk of being reduced. The poorest and most marginalized groups are at risk of never returning to school, with children instead at risk of forced child labour and/or child marriage. The price they will pay on their future will be long lasting. From previous crisis, we know that the longer children are out of school, the greater the risk that they will not return to school. This is the biggest education emergency of our lifetime.

COVID-19 disrupted the whole education system

Economic hardship risks many children never returning to school

Alongside school closures, physical distancing measures have a significant impact on employment, putting a strain on family finances and the economy. This is likely to increase child poverty amongst the millions of children living in vulnerable communities. As a result, children from vulnerable families risk not returning to school because they won't be able to pay the fees, or they have been forced into child labour or into early marriage to help make ends meet.



“For the future, I am worried about not continuing my education because of the poverty of my parents. Many of my age groups are currently housekeepers in the big city. My ambition to become a midwife is threatened by marriage before I graduate.”
Natacha, 12, Mali

Based on evidence from the Ebola crisis, the Malala Fund estimates that approximately 10 million more secondary school aged girls globally could be out of school after the crisis has passed.ⁱⁱ During the 2014-16 Ebola Virus Disease outbreak in West Africa, the number of adolescent pregnancies dramatically increased, leaving the girls on their own, and not able to come back to school, after the outbreak. At the end of Ebola Crisis in Sierra Leone, the country had recorded an increase of 11,000 teenage pregnancies.ⁱⁱⁱ One of the consequences has been the drop of the enrolment rates for girls aged 12 to 17 which fell from 50 to 34 percent in many villages either because they were pregnant or they were married.



Funding gaps more than ever

In this context, and despite all the efforts made to date, the international community has not sufficiently recognized the huge learning crisis the pandemic has caused. This has resulted in limited action and a shocking lack of investment in education so far: it is estimated that a \$ 6.2 billion USD gap in education for Africa's most vulnerable children^{iv} could result from pandemic's economic impact. The World Bank has committed \$160 billion over 15 months to assist countries with the health, economic and social shocks caused by the pandemic.^v However, it is unclear what proportion of this has been allocated to education. More needs to be done to prioritize education during the recovery phase.

Save the Children's report shows COVID-19 could reduce national & international education financing. The global lockdown is likely to continue having a significant impact on the global economic growth. The IMF (June 2020) projects a 4.9 per cent decrease in the global economy.^{vi} The analysis for this report assumes that a share of government expenditures allocated to education drops by 10 per cent (equivalent to a comparable analysis by the World Bank in May 2020), due to a reprioritization in spending towards other sectors.

National education systems in Democratic Republic of Congo, Burkina, Mali, Niger or Nigeria already face considerable challenges as a result of the on-going conflict and displacement and a critical lack of funding. COVID-19 exacerbates these already dire challenges. There is an urgent need to invest now (financial and technical) in alternative education systems to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in WCA countries.

2.0 An already fragile system facing different crisis

Before the pandemic, education was already in crisis in many WCA countries.

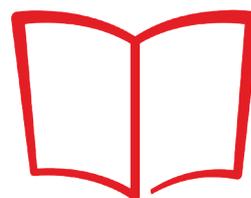
Even before the COVID-19 crisis, many countries in WCA already had the highest rates of education exclusion of all regions, with more than one-fifth of children aged 6-11 years out of school in normal times. The sustainable global goal 4 (SDG4) is the education goal. It aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” New analysis conducted by Save the Children identified 12 countries as being in ‘extreme risk’ of falling behind in their progress towards SDG4 due to the pandemic. Amongst them, we have nine from WCA region namely Niger, Mali, Chad, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal and Cote d’Ivoire. For these governments, this will mean missing the opportunity to give a whole generation of children the chance to learn and develop to their full potential. Unemployment and underemployment, poverty and inequality will increase. All this creates frustration with unfortunate consequences in an environment where insecurity is a big challenge.

Beyond these structural challenges, WCA is also facing a learning crisis linked to the huge deterioration of the security in the region. Over the past 2 years, armed groups have intensified attacks in parts of Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria and Niger. Armed conflicts, forced displacements and protracted crises have disrupted the education of millions of children and youth in WCA countries, Burkina Faso being the epicenter of the crisis with 2,500 school closures in March 2020.

With COVID 19, Education has been hit particularly hard, affecting the future of a generation of children in one of the most vulnerable regions in the world. This is particularly critical for Children living in countries affected by humanitarian crises, such as DRC, Mali, Nigeria. There, the COVID-19 outbreak is creating significant pressure on an already overburdened education system.

From our extensive work with children from fragile and conflict affected states, we know that when crises hit, children want to be able to continue their education as one of their top priorities. They tell us that education is the key to their future, their protection, their happiness and their health, and that it cannot be delayed. Last year our report Education Against the Odds,^{vii} revealed that children affected by a crisis are more than twice as likely to rank going to school as their top concern over other needs.

“In the locality of origin, because of conflicts, we could no longer go to school, it hurt me very much because we learned a lot at school and I felt good with my school friends”, says Natacha from Mali, 12 years old.



It's now time to **reinforce** the efforts made by **government to reach the most vulnerable.**

Keeping Learning Alive

***“It’s been 2 months that the schools are empty
Let the benches begin to wrinkle
A big delay is coming
A desperate look on his face
Wishes are lower
The learning stops
Let’s review our lessons and do our assignments
In order to better adapt to the opening of classes”
Diaminatou Kanounté, a 16-year-old advocate from Mali, expresses how she feels in a poem.***

The impact of school closures extends beyond disruption to children’s learning to other significant risks to the most marginalized children, including those from low-income households, refugees and internally displaced children, girls and children with disabilities. These children and youth rely on schools to access other services such as school meals, menstrual hygiene kits, health services including deworming and malaria treatment, child protection services, specialist support for children with disabilities and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) activities and interventions. It is essential that in the education response to school closures, learning is kept alive and these other impacts are effectively addressed. Governments need to put systems in place to respond to these growing vulnerabilities.

Promoting inclusive distance learning



***“The government should provide alternative ways of learning for us while we are at home”
MAYOWA, 11,
NIGERIA***

With school closures, children and youth need alternative ways to develop and learn, stay connected to school, and prepare for returning to schools when they reopen. In Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Nigeria, and other countries, a number of schools and universities have moved some of their programs to online platforms and have encouraged students to get connected. Close to 1 million students have been connected to a platform in Ghana, and similarly in Burkina Faso and Cote d’Ivoire. Many countries have set up radio learning opportunities and recently Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire have reopened schools for exam classes.

However, access to the materials and technology to continue learning is desperately unequal; known as the ‘digital divide’. This refers to the gap between individuals, families and geographical areas at different income levels related to their opportunity to access technology and their

use of the Internet for various activities.^{viii} In Sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated, that 89 per cent of learners do not have access to household computers and 82% lack internet access

Urgent efforts must be made to reach children with no Internet access, through low-tech or no-tech learning options, including paper-based learning packs. Based on previous programming and global evidence, we know that Interactive Radio and Audio Instructions can provide a positive impact in keeping children connected with education, caregivers’ teaching skills and community participation in learning efforts. The necessary infrastructure, markets, and service economies are often in place across many low resource contexts. However, rural areas suffer from poor radio signal and battery power, and there are issues in terms of home languages and comprehension.^{ix}

Preparing for the safe return to school

“I am afraid that the school year will be declared invalid due to COVID-19”, said Rosalie Masika Kalunga from DRC, 14 years old.

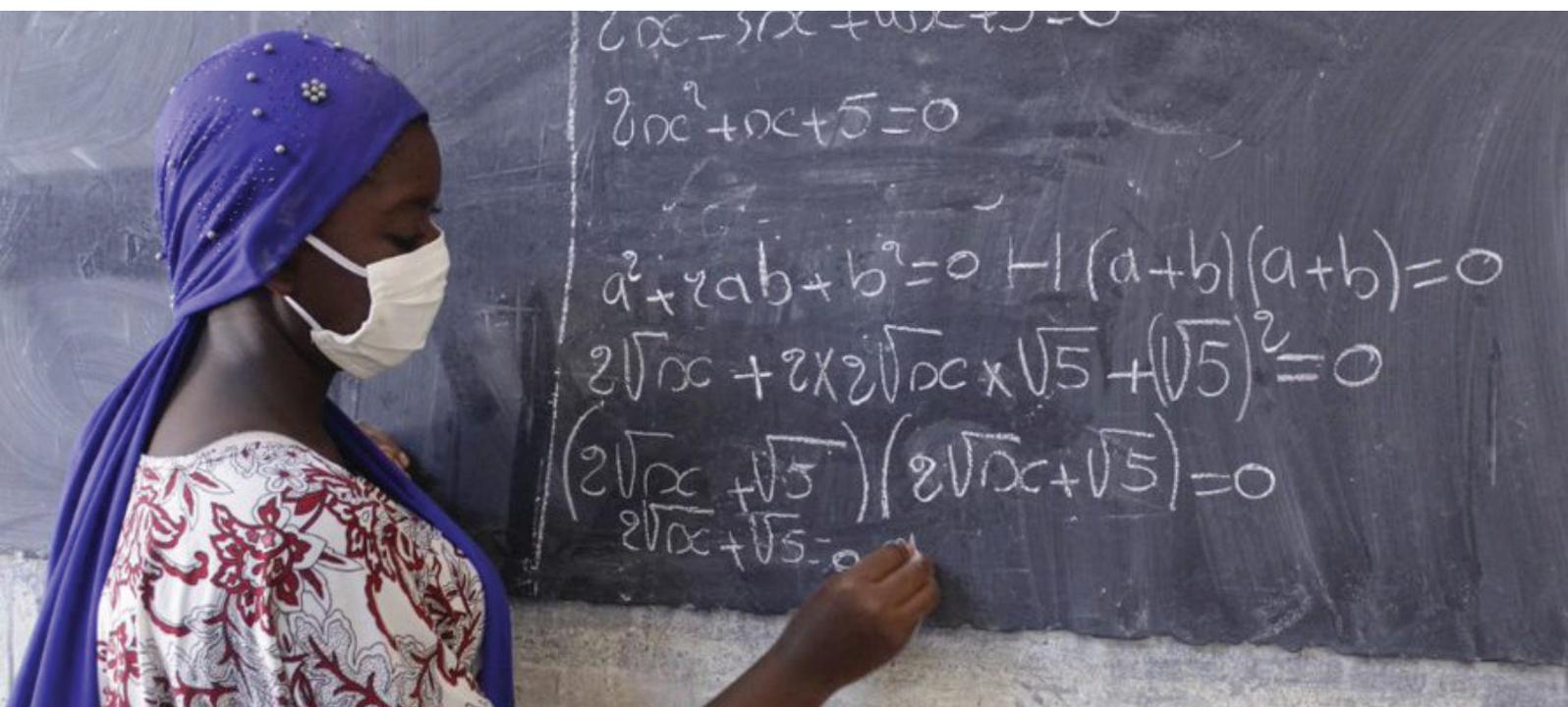
Some countries are tentatively reopening their school doors to children again, but the experience has had mixed results so far and many learners like Rosalie will end the school year without returning to school. As of mid-June, five countries in WCA had not yet announced a date for schools to reopen and four countries had plans for partial reopening.^x This means that when children return they will have missed many months of schooling. How do they absorb all the missing hours of learning from the curriculum? How will the school year be validated for those who will not resume school because they are not in Exam Classes? Education authorities must address these big questions and ensure that the school calendar will be rearranged so that children can catch up on their lost education and that systems are in place to ensure the most vulnerable children won't be excluded.

Governments and the international community need to plan now for the safe reopening of schools. Interest in going back to school may be much lower for vulnerable or struggling children and youth if they feel they will not be able to catch up and if schools do not offer extensive support for accelerated learning. Government decisions on school openings must be guided by Ministries of Health and Education, and health partners, based on reliable

public health information which takes into consideration the wider package of interventions in place like physical distancing and home quarantine and the preparedness of the school to reopen.

Less than a quarter of schools in sub-Saharan Africa had any handwashing facilities.^{xi} This means that 620 million children do not have access to decent toilets at school and around 900 million are not able to wash their hands properly.^{xii} It is clear that school reopening will not mean a return to normal school life. A number of measures will need to be put in place to ensure that children and teachers are safe at school. Physical distancing will need to remain a public health strategy, including in schools. However, we know that in many contexts, physical distancing in schools and communities is near impossible. In WCA countries, sometime each teacher is responsible for 40 children and in some refugee camps, class sizes can be as large as 120 children. Small, crowded classrooms mean that it is simply not possible to keep children one-two meters apart.

This requires health and hygiene facilities at school for all. Teachers, educational and cleaning staff should be trained in school hygiene practices and disinfection. Save the Children is using our strong community network to reach remote schools with vital pandemic public health messages and to help resource them with hygiene equipment.



The most vulnerable risk being excluded

When schools do reopen, there is a significant risk that some children will not return to the classroom. Children face many risks that may disrupt their learning whilst out of school - they may be required to take on extra care-giving responsibilities, or may be forced into child labour to help increase family finances at a time when we know poverty is on the rise. Girls face an increased risk of gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy, and being forced into marriage. Some families may not be able to afford the fees involved with schooling, and others may be fearful of sending their children to school whilst the virus remains a health risk.

There are particular risks for refugee and internally displaced children living in camps, where physical distancing will often be extremely challenging.

Niger: Not forgetting the IDPs despite COVID-19

Save the Children's humanitarian interventions in Niger^{xiii} for refugees fleeing violence from neighboring countries and internally displaced people continues, with new safety measures in place to prevent further spread of Covid19 in the country. In April 2020, despite the challenges, our distribution team reached a small community of internally displaced people in a remote area of the Tillabéri region. Our team assisted 48 families, the majority of them children. The children and their families received essential goods such as mats, bucket, and kitchen equipment, as well food items, such as rice, beans and oil. The unfolding multifaceted humanitarian crisis in Niger is driven by wide spread violence and food and water shortages. Malnutrition is a chronic issue and many children have no access to education.

Reopening schools and learning spaces in camps and camp-like settings may require specific considerations. Children here are already the most likely to be out of school before the pandemic, at risk of dropping out of school, and to not be learning while in school.

As schools reopen, strong nationally directed and community led back-to-school campaigns are needed to ensure that progress is made on universal access to education. The key messages in back-to-school campaigns must be child-friendly, age-appropriate, accessible to and inclusive of persons with disabilities and available in the relevant local languages.

Sierra Leone responded to the challenge of re-enrollment (and indeed, trying to increase enrollment to above pre-Ebola levels) by waiving school and examination fees for two years, providing school feeding for primary students, and through community mobilization and targeted support to vulnerable groups.

Recommendations

The impact of schools closures on a generation of children will be immense. This is an education emergency that requires action today. With this Policy brief, Save the Children congratulates the work already accomplished by all education actors. To support children to continue learning, to return to school and to build better education systems for the future, Save the Children recommends:

National Governments

- To develop clear and gender sensitive strategy to ensure availability of inclusive and long-term distance learning options for all children.
- Those strategies need to ensure continuity via low cost systems, such as radio program, to integrate the most vulnerable who don't have access to TV and digital platforms and they also need to be accessible in accessible languages;
- To identify and respond to the specific needs of the girl, who are most likely to not go back to school;
- To support and equip teachers with the skills to provide quality distance teaching.
- Social and emotional learning activities should be integrated into the curricula all forms of alternative distance education, whenever possible to protect child and youth wellbeing and mitigate the impacts of trauma during - and after - the crisis.
- Ministries of education, partners and donors should develop the comprehensive plan for safe re-opening of schools and examinations missed due to the crisis or find an alternative method of certification and progression;

International Communities

- Advocate for members to request support from humanitarian coordination systems (reference to Education Cluster with UNICEF and SCI as co-leads)
- Increase funding and sharing of proven best practices across regional and international platforms
- Private sector foundations should step-up funding for the education response, provide technical advice and access to innovative education solutions.

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