

SEAMEO

Ministerial Policy
e-Forum on
COVID-19 Response
REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS



SEAMEO
Ministerial Policy
e-Forum on
COVID-19 Response
Report of Proceedings

**SEAMEO Ministerial Policy e-Forum on COVID-19 Response:
Report of Proceedings**

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The graphic features the text 'Executive Summary' in a bold, white, sans-serif font, centered within a light blue, irregularly shaped area. This area is framed by a dark teal border that has a slight 3D effect, appearing to be a shadowed frame around the blue shape.

Executive Summary

The SMPeF on COVID-19 Response was convened by H.E. Dr. Radzi Jidin, Senior Minister of Education, Malaysia, and SEAMEO Council President, in collaboration with the Education Ministers of Southeast Asia and the SEAMEO Secretariat last 18 June 2020, 9:30 A.M. (GMT +7). This was the first virtual gathering of the 11 Education Ministers where they shared best practices during the COVID-19 lock-down and discussed their educational policies and plans to ensure that learning takes place wherever and whenever.

The presentations of the Education Ministers focused on five essential elements—the immediate actions they have taken when education was disrupted, the alternative modalities they chose to ensure that learning continued at home, the evolving roles of teachers and parents in educating learners, the efforts they put in place to reach the disadvantaged and vulnerable, and the educational policies they enacted with regard to school reopening. Best practices, lessons learned, reflections, and positive discoveries were also shared in an effort to address the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic that caused unprecedented school lock-downs.

The final output of this e-forum is the “Joint Statement of the Ministers of Education,” which features the following action items:

- Enhancing the capacities of teachers and key education enablers in their new and continuously evolving role vis-a-vis technology-mediated and alternative learning modalities, as the region adapts to the realities of COVID-19
- Fostering a learning environment that is quick to respond to disruption, enabling learning to continue through appropriate education solutions and technologies that best respond to the needs and contexts of each member country

- Sustaining the development and advancement of resources, such as OERs, in the region to best respond to the educational needs of every learner, wherever they may be and whatever condition they are in
- Developing strategic partnerships and alliances to ensure adequate political commitment to and investment in education for the COVID-19 recovery phase
- Promoting collaboration with national COVID-19 coalitions; regional, international, bilateral, and multilateral organisations; and partners to promote educational equity, inclusion, relevance, efficiency, and financing

The draft joint statement can be found in Annex 1 of this report.

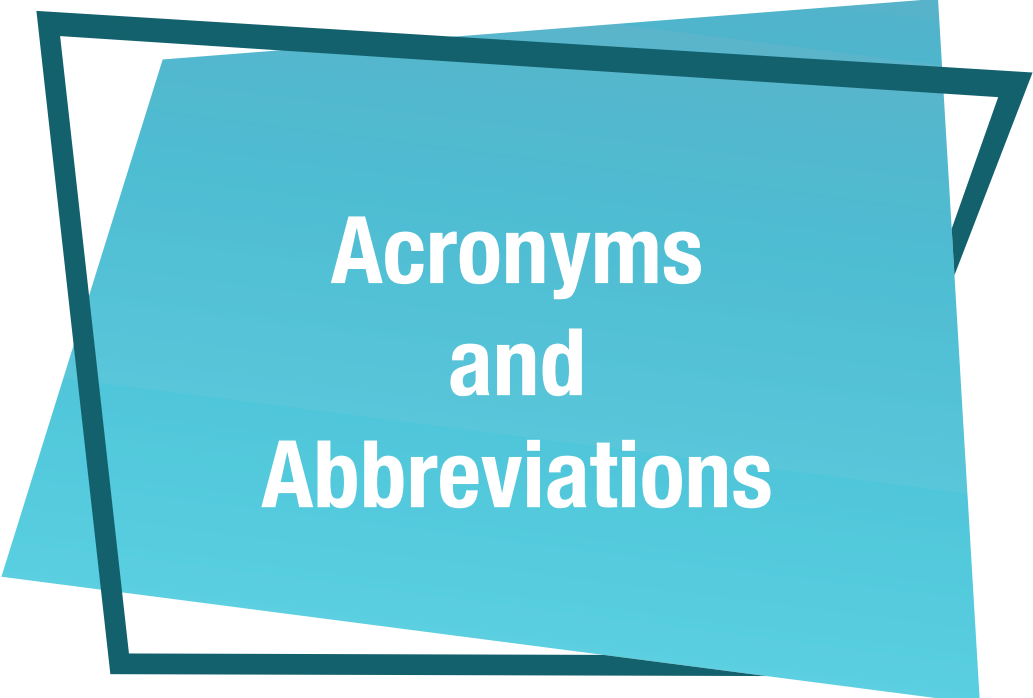


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- H.E. Mr. Ong Ye Kung, Minister of Education, Singapore, and SEAMEO Council Vice President
- H.E. Dato Seri Setia Awang Hj Hamzah bin Hj Sulaiman, Minister of Education, Brunei Darussalam
- H.E. Dr. Hang Chuon Naron, Minister of Education, Youth and Sport, Cambodia
- Hon. Prof. Dr. Ainun Na'im, Director-General, representing H.E. Mr. Nadiem Anwar Makarim, Minister of Education and Culture, Indonesia
- H.E. Madam Sengdeuane Lachanthaboune, Minister of Education and Sports, Lao PDR
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- H.E. Dr. Leonor Magtolis Briones, Secretary of Education, Philippines
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- H.E. Madam Dulçe de Jesus Soares, Minister of Education, Youth and Sports, Timor-Leste
- H.E. Prof. Dr. Phung Xuan Nha, Minister of Education and Training, Vietnam

Credit also goes to all of the SEAMEO desk officers and high officials for their unwavering support in organising this virtual gathering, as well as the SEAMEO Webinar Series Team for all the necessary preparations.



Acronyms and Abbreviations

BE-LCP	Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan
DepEd	Department of Education
ICT	information and communication technology
MDEP	Myanmar Digital Education Platform
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoEC	Ministry of Education and Culture
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MoET	Ministry of Education and Training
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport/s
OER	open education resource
PDR	People's Democratic Republic
SEAMEO	Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization
SMPeF	SEAMEO Ministerial Policy e-Forum
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Fund



Part 1

Introduction

COVID-19 has dramatically changed the education landscape in Southeast Asia. The SEAMEO member countries have been affected at varying levels by quarantine and lock-down mechanisms, which triggered the closure of schools and educational institutions in an effort to flatten the curve and control the spread of COVID-19. In Southeast Asia alone, about 247 million learners hunkered down and shifted to online or flexible learning options from their own homes to comply with strict social distancing protocols and instructions from their national governments.

The SMPeF thus put forth SEAMEO's overarching aspiration to enhance regional understanding, cooperation, and unity of purpose among member countries to enhance the quality of life through the establishment of forums among policymakers and experts and the promotion of sustainable human resource development. This aspiration is again tested amidst the ensuing crisis. We hope that strategic collaboration will continue to ensure that no learner is left behind.

The SEAMEO Secretariat launched a multi-pronged approach to assist the member countries in addressing gaps brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from providing regular situation updates, it also pools online resources and shares relevant information to member countries as part of SEAMEO's contribution to remote teaching and learning remedies initiated due to lock-downs. On 28 April 2020, the **SEAMEO Webinar Series** was launched and reached more than 400,000 educators and education stakeholders from Southeast Asia and the rest of the world. The SMPeF is the first virtual gathering of Ministers of Education to discuss the following:

- Responses made by the education ministries to the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically regarding school closures, remote student assessment, and school reopening
- Strategies created to frame the “new normal” in education and the future of learning in a post-COVID-19 world

- Use of ICT and the evolving role of teachers in distance learning amidst the pandemic
- Retooling teachers and assessing the relevance of quality education amidst the crisis

This report captures the critical points discussed during the virtual gathering of Education Ministers.



Part 2

SMPeF Overview

The Education Ministers of the SEAMEO member countries participated in the SMPeF to share about their educational responses to national efforts made to curb the spread of COVID-19. On 18 June 2020 at 9:30 A.M., Bangkok time, the Education Ministers met online and shared innovations, approaches, and educational policies, as well as their plans to ensure that no learner is left behind due to school closures. Specifically, all of the SMPeF presenters were guided by the following questions:

- How did the Education Ministers prepare for and manage their countries' entire education system when it was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How did the Education Ministers ensure that learning continued?
- What good practices and solutions allowed teacher education and student learning to continue despite school lock-downs?
- How do the Education Ministers re-imagine the future of education? And how will education ministries transition from the disruption to the post-COVID-19 world?

The SMPeF was hosted by Senior Minister of Education, Malaysia, and SEAMEO Council President and supported by all of the Education Ministers of member countries and the SEAMEO Secretariat. The following Education Ministers took part in the virtual meeting:

- H.E. Mr. Ong Ye Kung, Minister of Education, Singapore, and SEAMEO Council Vice President
- H.E. Dato Seri Setia Awang Hj Hamzah bin Hj Sulaiman, Minister of Education, Brunei Darussalam
- H.E. Dr. Hang Chuon Naron, Minister of Education, Youth and Sport, Cambodia

- Hon. Prof. Dr. Ainun Na'im, Director-General, representing H.E. Mr. Nadiem Anwar Makarim, Minister of Education and Culture, Indonesia
- H.E. Madam Sengdeuane Lachanthaboune, Minister of Education and Sports, Lao PDR
- H.E. Dr. Myo Thein Gyi, Minister of Education, Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar
- H.E. Dr. Leonor Magtolis Briones, Secretary of Education, Philippines
- H.E. Mr. Nataphol Teepsuwan, Minister of Education, Thailand
- H.E. Madam Dulçe de Jesus Soares, Minister of Education, Youth and Sports, Timor-Leste
- H.E. Prof. Dr. Phung Xuan Nha, Minister of Education and Training, Vietnam

Dr. Ethel Agnes Pascua-Valenzuela, SEAMEO Secretariat Director, served as moderator and steered the discussions and presentations for the SMPeF.

Part 3

COVID-19 Responses from the SEAMEO Council of Ministers

The SMPeF featured the SEAMEO Council of Ministers' policy and programmatic responses amidst unprecedented times. Since the e-forum was streamed on **YouTube Live**, educators, learners, and other education stakeholders were able to listen in, learn from, and benefit from the knowledge and information that the Education Ministers imparted on the current state of education as tested by challenges arising from school lock-downs. The Education Ministers also presented their strategies and plans to jump-start the reopening of schools after months of closure while ensuring that learners, educators, and education communities remain safe and healthy.

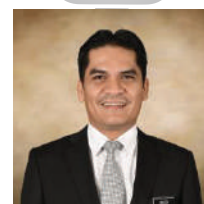


Keynote Presentations

H.E. Dr. Radzi Jidin, Senior Minister of Education, Malaysia and SEAMEO Council President

“We need to apply the strategies as well as incorporate the lessons learned during the pandemic to help alleviate disruptions and address issues. We must ensure that these challenges do not discourage the children and youth, particularly the underprivileged, from returning to school.”

—H.E. Dr. Radzi



H.E. Dr. Radzi Jidin, SEAMEO Council President and Senior Minister of Education, Malaysia, presented the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic by sharing innovations to ensure that learning continues despite school lock-downs, as well as plans and policies for school reopening. Malaysia, just like most of the countries worldwide, was affected by COVID-19. He urged everyone to learn to cope with uncertainties amidst unprecedented school closures and lock-downs. His presentation focused on alternative modes of delivery, digital platforms, innovative solutions to reach the unreached, efforts to reopen schools, and future plans and policies.

Alternative Delivery Modes

In an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, the MoE immediately acted and informed 440,000 teachers to use alternative modes of delivery, mostly through home-based learning. Such a move was challenging, as teachers, parents, and even students needed to equip and familiarise themselves with online platforms. Teachers had to transition to online platforms while parents had to adjust to the additional responsibility of facilitating their children's learning. The students were also affected, as they needed to get used to studying in a new learning environment—not in school but at home.

Digital Platform

Prior to the school lock-down, Malaysia already invested in a digital learning platform back in 2019. That move facilitated the transition from the usual face-to-face approach to using educational applications, such as *Google Classroom*. In May 2020, the MoE reported that 90% of Malaysian teachers and 59% of students were already using the platform. Other applications and in-demand content were also introduced. While technological solutions were made available, some areas in the country still did not have access due to lack or the absence of appropriate equipment. While efforts were exerted to implement home-based learning, it still cannot address all aspects of school learning. Some subjects may be difficult, if not impossible, to effectively teach outside school.

Innovative Solutions to Reach the Unreached

The Malaysian presentation also tackled common concerns across the region, including social and economic gaps, the digital divide, and the lack of delivery systems. As such, the minister urged everyone to push on. He also encouraged the children and youth, particularly the underprivileged, to not be distracted or discouraged from returning to school to continue learning.

COVID-19's impact on large-scale, high-stakes public examinations was also discussed. The minister stated that reliance on these exams has made strategising an appropriate approach precarious. The issues that surfaced challenged educators to introduce more holistic assessment methods, such as formative tests.

School Reopening Safety Protocols

Minister Radzi announced that schools in Malaysia will reopen on 24 June 2020 with strict guidelines to ensure the safety of the children and the entire school community. He reiterated the need for more holistic learner assessment to determine progress during the lock-down. He also asked teachers to design lessons based on the assessment results. He then reminded teachers to give equal focus not just on learning progress but also on the socio-emotional development of the students.

Moving Forward

The pandemic has challenged everyone. It required educators to think outside the box. While the MoE's plans are consistent with SEAMEO's Seven Priority Areas, much still needs to be done, and everyone can contribute to make things better. Such improvements include the need to assess the readiness of countries to respond to a crisis, such as COVID-19, which triggered the reevaluation of current mechanisms for disaster recovery and resilience.

Minister Radzi encouraged all Education Ministers, along with all SEAMEO units, associate member countries, affiliate members, and partners to support the organisation in framing *SEAMEO Strategic Plan 2021–2030*, bearing in mind the lessons learned and experiences gained from the pandemic.

**H.E. Mr. Ong Ye Kung, Minister of Education, Singapore,
and SEAMEO Council Vice President**



“*In the months to come, we will hopefully settle into a new normal, acquire new capabilities, and uncover new opportunities. We will be able to get schools to open, maybe in stages and carefully, but they will have to open for the sake of our children. Otherwise, we are undoing many decades of societal progress that enabled many children to gain access to quality education. That is a significant achievement for many societies. Do not let COVID-19 undo many years of progress.*”

—H.E. Mr. Ong

H.E. Mr. Ong Ye Kung, SEAMEO Council Vice President and Minister of Education, Singapore, presented the MoE's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and tackled the solutions and educational policies it formulated. The presentation revolved around three questions that confronted every education minister, namely:

- Do we keep schools open?
- If you answered “yes,” how do we do it safely?
- Whatever we do, whatever our responses are to the first two questions, how do we make sure the most vulnerable children are taken care of?

These three questions involved difficult trade-offs and choices, the need to mobilise government and community resources, and harnessing human ingenuity and spirit of cooperation.

School Reopening

The first part of the presentation focused on the safe reopening of schools. Minister Ong pointed out the reality that COVID-19 would be around until an effective vaccine was developed. However, schools in Singapore could not be closed for that long, as prolonged closures would have a significant impact on students, setting back their learning for many years, possibly even into adulthood.

Minister Ong shared various steps and protocols that were put in place to ensure the safe reopening of schools, such as wearing masks, keeping a safe distance from one another, staggering arrival and dismissal times, and reducing the density of mass student activities. However, such measures would compromise educational quality as holistic education required discussions, socialisation, playing together, going outdoors, and embarking on learning journeys. There was a need to understand the nature of COVID-19 and adjust responses based on available information so that as many normal activities as possible can continue while keeping schools safe.

A major challenge was getting parents and the public on board with decisions made and have confidence in the safety measures taken.

Reaching the Unreached

The MoE also launched programmes to help the vulnerable learners in Singapore. Minister Ong said that not all homes and families were created equal; some had more resources than others. Schools, as public institutions, provided a good common experience for all children, so when schooling was disrupted, the disadvantaged students suffered the most. That was the reason why schools were kept open and accessible for this group of students, even during Singapore's so-called "circuit breaker." He commended teachers who went beyond the call of duty, as they came back to school to watch over these students, provided them meals, and guided them in their learning during the COVID-19 disruptions.

Silver Linings

Minister Ong enumerated the "silver linings" or positive developments that surfaced despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic:

- It gave school systems in many countries a push towards blended forms of learning for students to continue to access educational resources.
- Online and home-based learning resulted in new discoveries, as the shift gave learners the time and space to learn at their own pace and nurtured in them a certain sense of curiosity to go beyond the curriculum. While home-based and online learning cannot replace classroom lessons, the advantages it provided can serve as learning inputs to improve education in the future.
- Students had the opportunity to strengthen their character and sense of duty to the broader community in a real-life context and not just through books or classroom lessons. The COVID-19 pandemic enabled them to show empathy, care, and concern, especially to front-line workers, as they rallied friends and the community to support the less privileged.

- Parents had greater appreciation for teachers. Parents also realised and appreciated the quick adjustments that teachers made in implementing contingency plans to keep schools open while taking care of the students who were present physically in school and those learning from home.

Minister Ong emphasised the need to build on the positive momentum to establish better partnerships with parents in educating children. The fight is still in the early stages but once things settle into the new normal, new capabilities will be acquired, including opportunities. His advice to all was not to let COVID-19 undo the many years of progress made in education.

Minister Ong also commended the efforts of the SEAMEO units and Secretariat in sharing best practices through webinars and offering free online modules for educators. He expressed his belief that the close network and partnership among Education Ministers will grow from strength to strength.

Country Presentations

**H.E. Dato Seri Setia Awang Hj Hamzah bin Hj Sulaiman,
Minister of Education, Brunei Darussalam**



“For Brunei Darussalam, we have seen collaborative efforts through the whole-of-nation approach with stakeholders and government and non-government agencies that helped ease the transition to the new way of teaching and learning. Our immediate response in providing necessary guidelines and professional development for teachers and school leaders to cater to online teaching and learning proved very useful. Finally, we will also strive to ensure that our marginalised children continue to receive education, have access to good nutrition, and reduce risks of psychological harm. We will to continue to provide care to all children in need.”

—H.E. Dato Seri Sulaiman

H.E. Dato Seri Setia Awang Hj Hamzah bin Hj Sulaiman, Minister of Education, Brunei Darussalam, presented the MoE's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and tackled the solutions and education policies it formulated.

New Teaching and Learning Approaches

The COVID-19 pandemic demanded immediate response, which included using new approaches to teaching and learning, keeping in mind the welfare, safety, and well-being of learners. Thus, the MoE decided to advance the school holidays and when the second term commenced on 30 March 2020. The schools utilised the blended approach—online/home-based and remote learning. Home learning packs were given to marginalised and vulnerable students who cannot access online resources. Since 2 June 2020, schools continued to operate with only 50% of learners coming to school while the rest used other platforms.

Brunei Darussalam's COVID-19 responses were categorised according to four main target groups—teachers and school leaders, students, parents, and other stakeholders. For the first group (i.e., teachers and school leaders), the following initiatives were introduced:

- Business continuity plan guidelines
- Online and home-based learning guidelines

- Social distancing and hygiene guidelines
- Curricular modifications resulting from a review of all subjects across all levels and reprioritisation were then done to ensure that resources are available and lessons are broadcast on national television
- Capacity building for teachers and school leaders
- Technical support provision to ensure the sufficient supply of materials, such as copiers and paper, in school for printing home learning packs
- Hot lines and help desks that motivated teachers to keep up with the rapid shift to online teaching and learning and allay their anxieties

Shift to Alternative Learning Modalities

The students were most affected by the pandemic, as the sudden shift in learning modality proved to be overwhelming. The following initiatives were introduced to address issues and challenges:

- Prioritisation of curriculum components by subject and topic
- Technical support provision to collaborate with relevant non-government agencies for computer and tablet donations, which were loaned to students who had accessibility concerns
- Supporting marginalised learners to reduce the education deficit to an absolute minimum and ensure that they had access to proper nutrition
- Free data allocation from local telecommunications companies to use white-listed apps and EduPack data packages for students and teachers
- Home learning packs that were sent directly to students' homes
- Mobilisation of drive-through pickup centres that served free meals in school
- Provision of customised learning resources and materials, as well as individual educational plans to learners with special needs
- Establishment of hot lines that provided psychological and counseling support from school counselors to boost student morale and motivate learners

Reaching Out to Education Stakeholders

To alleviate parents' woes, guidelines with specific details on online teaching and learning and frequently asked questions for easy reference were provided. Informal chats and discussions were also employed to address concerns, apprehensions, and other difficulties.

Other stakeholders were not left behind through the following actions:

- Exemption of school canteen operators from paying monthly rental fees and tapping them to supply food to marginalised and underprivileged learners
- Tapping school buses to assist in delivering home learning packs

The Whole-of-Nation Approach

The minister highlighted the collaborative efforts that went into the whole-of-nation approach, which facilitated the transition to the new way of teaching and learning. The guidelines and professional development training also benefited teachers and school leaders while marginalised children received education, had access to proper nutrition, and reduced risks of psychological harm.

**H.E. Dr. Hang Chuon Naron,
Minister of Education, Youth and Sport, Cambodia**

“COVID-19 has transformed the world, our lives, and our education system. Globalisation has made the spread even faster. But we should not allow COVID-19 to divide us. We must remain united to fight against the pandemic.”

—H.E. Dr. Hang Chuon Naron



H.E. Dr. Hang Chuon Naron presented the COVID-19 response of Cambodia based on the policies and protocols formulated by the MoEYS, specifically using online platforms, best practices, and preparations for the country's gradual school reopening.

Online Platforms

Minister Hang Chuon Naron urged all member countries to make a united stand against the COVID-19 pandemic. He shared that Cambodia closed all schools and immediately produced digital content for education and e-learning platforms. **Facebook**, **YouTube**, and other social media channels served as education platforms to provide education during the COVID-19 lock-down, along with an online education portal. Shortly thereafter, a new digital television channel was launched to increase the reach of distance learning, especially to those without Internet access. The MoEYS also allowed students to form small groups for self-study and paper-based distance learning with guidance from teachers. Online administration was also introduced to process paperwork for education officials.

Good Practices

The minister then proceeded to share the following good practices to manage the impact of COVID-19 to the education system:

- Communicating with education officials, students, and parents about COVID-19 and the educational changes
- Establishing the Digital Education Forum and the Centre for Digital Education
- Harmonising digital platforms and software for e-learning using **Google Suite** and **Google Apps** while employing traditional distance learning methods for those with no Internet access
- Partnering with other ministries and all stakeholders
- Administering schools digitally
- Using digital education for teacher training

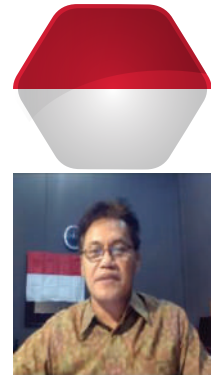
Gradual School Reopening

To conclude his presentation, Minister Hang Chuon Naron shared a three-phase gradual school reopening in Cambodia. He shared that for the first phase, 10–15 schools that can comply with the high standards set by the Health Safety Guidelines will reopen and offer both face-to-face and e-learning to minimise risks. He added that the country will move to the second phase only after success in the first phase has been achieved. He also explained the second phase, which sought to reopen middle schools, and finally, the third phase, which aims to reopen the rest of the schools.

**Hon. Prof. Dr. Ainun Na'im, Secretary-General,
Ministry of Education and Culture, Indonesia**

“We must learn to adapt to the new normal, which means being able to study and work from anywhere. The same approach can be done for all collaborative undertakings. Indonesia is one with the region in looking for ways to further collaborate with other SEAMEO member countries.”

—Hon. Prof. Dr. Ainun



Hon. Prof. Dr. Ainun Na'im, Director-General of the MoEC, represented H.E. Mr. Nadiem Anwar Makarim, to share Indonesia's COVID-19 responses. Just like the other countries, the pandemic disrupted education in the country due to the unprecedented nationwide closure of schools and universities.

Learning Modalities

Director-General Ainun shared that Indonesia implemented distance learning using online, offline, and a combination of both approaches. Teachers and lecturers were also encouraged to use video conferences, digital documents, and other online technologies to continue performing their duties. To support their efforts, the MoEC coordinated with relevant stakeholders to lift Internet access quotas and provide free access to online education platforms and content. He also emphasised the effort to broadcast educational television programmes intended to close the connectivity gap, especially in rural areas.

School Reopening

With regard to the reopening of schools for academic year 2020–2021, the MoEC, together with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the Ministry of Domestic Affairs, issued a “Joint Decree on the Guidelines for Learning in the New Academic Year amidst the Pandemic.” This sought to ensure the health and safety of students, teachers, educational personnel, and family and community members.

Director-General Ainun also shared that 94% of the total number of students in Indonesia scattered across 429 districts and cities were categorised as part of the red, orange, and yellow zones, which meant they were prohibited from opening schools and conducting face-to-face classes. These schools will continue to employ distance learning, either through online classes or other means. The remaining 6%, comprising 85 districts and cities, were part of the green zone, which meant they were allowed to hold face-to-face classes in school following strict regulations, which include:

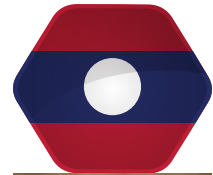
- Parents will act as the final decision makers.
- Strict health protocols will be implemented.

- A two-month transition period is mandatory.
- A gradual eligibility mechanism by school level, depending on student capability to abide by health protocols, will be followed.

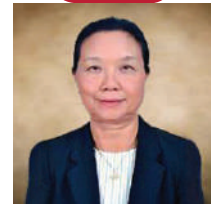
For university students, all theoretical subjects will be delivered online while those that require practical skill application should be held at the end of the term. Strict health protocols should also be observed in universities and institutions.

In closing, Director-General Ainun shared that everyone must learn to adapt to the new normal, which means developing the ability to study and work from anywhere. He also shared that the same can be done for all collaborative undertakings. Despite the crisis, the MoEC is one with the region in looking for ways to further collaborate with other SEAMEO member countries.

**H.E. Madam Sengdeuane Lachanthaboune,
Minister of Education and Sports, Lao PDR**



“We hope to further enhance cooperation in providing suitable materials for emergencies and incorporate high-quality ICT programmes into the existing educational curriculum while ensuring that they are engaging to improve education provision overall.”



—H.E. Madam Lachanthaboune

H.E. Madam Sengdeuane Lachanthaboune provided updates on Lao PDR's COVID-19 situation. She shared that schools had already been closed for three days when the country's first positive cases of COVID-19 were confirmed. The school closures affected 1,708,501 learners enrolled from the pre-primary to tertiary levels, including technical-vocational students. She added that prolonged closures would affect the learning and social well-being of learners, but was being balanced with the need to ensure the safety and well-being of teachers and learners alike. She added that the total number of confirmed cases was only 19 with zero deaths and no new cases have been reported in the past 50 days.

Preparing for COVID-19

The MoES established a COVID-19 task force to work alongside the national task force as part of Lao PDR's COVID-19 response. The ministry identified two priorities—ensure that every student, teacher, and educational staff member are safe and motivate educational institutions to continue providing learning via new pathways, such as distance and online learning. The Education and Sports Satellite television channel was created and began broadcasting programmes on 9 May to ensure continuous learning during the school lock-down. The initiative served as a supplementary learning resource for students since schools already reopened on 15 May. She added that these broadcasts were aired three times a week nationwide and covered topics, including Lao language, English, and mathematics for primary and secondary school students. She, however, shared the need to develop more teaching video resources in the immediate and long term to manage the delivery of education services during emergencies and furthering regular schooling.

Learning Continues

Lao PDR's priority is to ensure that learning continues, which includes the move to apply remote learning at home. That involved assigning homework to students weekly and using television and radio programmes developed by the ministry as a distance learning option. Minister Lachanthaboune shared that for early graders, learning materials were forwarded to parents while teachers of higher grades sent homework to the students directly. She likewise emphasised the crucial role that parents and guardians played during the lock-down, as they acted as bridges between the teachers and learners. Various apps and digital options were also utilised, including *Skype*, *WhatsApp*, *Facebook Messenger*, *Google Meet*, and *YouTube*.

The minister shared the following good practices and solutions:

- Developing and providing various alternative learning methods for students who live in different contexts while adhering to curricular requirements
- Using ICT and digital communication methods in combination with traditional teaching and learning practices
- Investing in the capacity building of in- and pre-service teachers on 21st-century skills that include ICT; computational thinking; and other science, technology, engineering, and mathematics skills

School Reopening

Minister Lechanthaboune shared the efforts of the MoES to reopen schools and reflect on measures to prevent, mitigate, and respond to future pandemics and other disruptions. She underscored the need to prepare education staff members to continuously provide education despite emergencies and invest in and utilise all available technological solutions. She also shared that the concept of the new normal will be subsumed into the ministry's educational plan.

In closing, Minister Lachanthaboune cited the abundant learning resources that the SEAMEO units have, which may be relevant during emergencies. She expressed hope that cooperation can be further enhanced to provide suitable learning resources amidst emergencies and that high-quality programmes can be integrated into existing curricula to ultimately lead to the improvement of education in the region.

**H.E. Dr. Myo Thein Gyi, Minister of Education,
Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar**



“We focused on our priorities—no learning loss, no discrimination, no one gets left behind, no school dropouts, reduced contact, reduced crowding, and supporting a healthy and safe learning environment.”

—H.E. Dr. Myo Thein Gyi

H.E. Dr. Myo Thein Gyi shared the current education situation in Myanmar. He cited that the disruption was minimised for basic education students because the lock-down coincided with the two-month-long summer vacation. He also gave some interesting COVID-19 statistics, including 62 out of the country's 330 townships had COVID-19 cases. Myanmar also had 24 days when no cases were reported, 48 days with one-digit case volumes, and 10 days with two-digit case numbers.

Planning for COVID-19

The following preparations and initiatives in Myanmar were cited by the minister to address challenges brought on by COVID-19:

- Developed a COVID-19 response and recovery plan for the ministry in the short, medium, and long terms in April
- Developed a response and recovery plan for the education sector, focusing on how the crisis will impact it, specifically with regard to access, quality, equity, and management, in May
- Managed to start the university entrance process in June
- Prepare for the reopening of the new academic year for basic education students by level while putting the necessary health and safety protocols in place and establishing preventive measures for schools in July
- Ensure that no learning loss nor discrimination ensues
- Reduce contact and crowding in schools
- Support healthy and safe learning environments by teaching students about the importance of hand-washing, wearing face masks and shields, and physical distancing

School Reopening

As part of the MoE's plans when schools reopen, free textbooks, exercise books, and pens and pencils will be given to students. Free masks, face shields, and infrared thermometers will also be provided for school front-liners to halt the spread of COVID-19. Hand-washing facilities will also be put up while personal protective equipment will be made available to schools with high numbers of COVID-19 cases. Private schools will have three options—operate as usual, open in shifts or alternating weeks, or limit schooling to three days a week. All these efforts aim to reduce physical contact and ensure that learners and educators are safe. The following initiatives were also launched:

- Development of standard operating procedures for coming to school, behaving in class, eating lunch, going home, and taking the school bus
- Provision of teaching-learning training for using the new textbooks for grades 4, 7, and 10 through an online and face-to-face five-day session
- Provision of health awareness training
- Conducting meetings with regional and statewide social ministers, parliament members, and regional and statewide education officers
- Announcement of the reopening of schools on television and via newspaper articles
- Identification of the school enrollment week in July

New Learning Delivery Modes

The MoE introduced new learning delivery modes to address the possible adverse impact of school closures and identified the following learning delivery modes for use in case of lock-downs:

- Educational television channel to stream videos for learners
- Using the MDEP for online learning activities
- Using the Department of Basic Education Box for learners without Internet access and those that reside in remote areas
- Educational digital video discs or video clips that learners can use
- One Tablet per School Initiative to enable schools with equipment to access learning materials online

- Online seminars for teachers and educators
- Video-conferencing meetings for educators and stakeholders

The MoE also shared the following initiatives as best practices from Myanmar, which helped the country facilitate learning despite school lock-downs:

- MDEP for online training on using the new textbooks
- Educational television channel
- Online diploma and masters courses

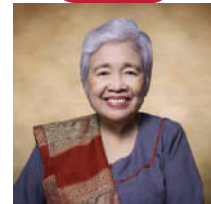
In closing, Minister Myo Thein Gyi shared what he called the “3Bs”:

- Build (i.e., ensuring the health and safety of learning environments)
- Back (i.e., managing learning continuity)
- Better (i.e., improving and accelerating quality curriculum-based learning achievement using various teaching-learning methodologies and teaching aids and relying on high-quality teachers)

**H.E. Dr. Leonor Magtolis Briones,
Secretary of Education, Philippines**



“*There are challenges, and I always tell teachers that we teach not only formulas and the wonders of science, but we teach courage. We teach students about hope. We can continue to operate. We can continue to share. We can continue to teach children with or without COVID.*”



—H.E. Dr. Briones

The Philippine presentation gave a snapshot of the COVID-19 situation in the country. H.E. Dr. Leonor Magtolis Briones emphasised that the biggest challenge was the magnitude of mobilising learners, teachers, and education personnel, totaling nearly 30 million individuals who were affected by the lock-down.

Secretary Briones tackled the short- and long-term education strategies of the Philippines to ensure continued learning. She shared that the DepEd was in the middle of improving educational quality when COVID-19 struck. She identified the creation of an evidence-based learning continuity plan as the department's first effort to tackle the pandemic. She reported that the president of the Philippines actively monitors the progress of efforts to fight COVID-19 and its impact on education. She also zeroed in on the support that the DepEd has obtained from the general public, education policymakers, communities, parents, teachers, and education bureaucrats. Another strategy she identified was the effort to create a risk communication strategy to remediate fear, uncertainty, and noise.

Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan

Secretary Briones presented in detail the BE-LCP, which serves as the DepEd's guide in delivering education amidst the crisis while ensuring the health, safety, and welfare of all learners, teachers, and education personnel. She then proceeded to discuss the principles of the BE-LCP, which include:

- Protecting the health, safety, and well-being of learners, teachers, and education personnel while preventing the further transmission of COVID-19
- Ensuring learning continuity
- Facilitating the safe return of learners and teachers to school when face-to-face classes resume
- Being sensitive to equity considerations and concerns and endeavouring to address them

- Linking and bridging the gap between the BE-LCP and the DepEd's Sulong EduKalidad and Education Futures Framework

One of the key elements of the BE-LCP is to strip the K–12 Curriculum down to the most essential learning competencies, which primarily focus on face-to-face teaching methodologies. The competencies were reduced from 15,000 to 5,000. The DepEd also developed multiple learning modalities with blended learning as a major option, keeping in mind the need to develop and prepare teachers and school leaders to maximise these. The BE-LCP also touched on the required health standards in schools and workplaces through close collaboration with the Department of Health.

School Reopening

Secretary Briones shared the DepEd's efforts to reopen schools, which include Brigada Eskwela and Balik Eskwela. She also presented the results of a survey to determine the views of parents and other stakeholders on the reopening of schools. She shared the outcome that revealed that a majority of the parents chose to open towards the end of August, which was consistent with the existing law that mandated the DepEd to reopen schools between June and August 2020. The department also reached out to partners to inform them of the possibility of donating not just school bags and supplies, but also gadgets that can help learners access resources online. She also shared her plans to maximise the department's efficiency by reorganising financing, procurement, and delivery to ensure that its personnel get their salaries and benefits on time. She identified these as critical, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. While efforts are being taken to expedite the process, she emphasised that everything should be aboveboard and consistent with existing laws, policies, and procedures. In terms of monitoring, evaluation, and adjustments, she informed everyone that the DepEd is now studying options and possibilities to revise existing protocols, which are mostly applicable to face-to-face learning.

Learning Platforms

Secretary Briones also introduced other blended or distance learning modalities, which include the use of printed or digital modules that teachers can deliver to students' homes or for parents to pick up at designated places with coordinated schedules. These should support learners who have limited access to the Internet and digital services. The secretary also shared that online learning resources may also be accessed through **DepEd Commons**, which currently has 8 million subscribers. Just like in other countries, television- or radio-based instruction will also be made available.

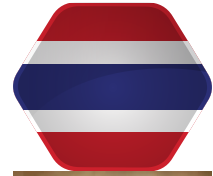
One of the biggest challenges that Secretary Briones shared was reaching 28 million learners. While it looked daunting on a national level, it can be managed through the regional offices who are in a better position to assess which options would work best in their context. She also discussed the result of another survey where 87% of teachers said they had their own personal gadgets. While these were personal, the secretary shared the commitment of the government to help generate resources to procure official gadgets for teachers.

The following key areas regarding the future of education in the Philippines were also presented:

- Exploring technologies for remote learning
- Re-framing the existing curriculum
- Anticipating educational opportunities by relying on innovations
- Reinforcing learning sciences, assessment, analytics, and knowledge mobilisation
- “Smartifying” learning spaces and resources

Secretary Briones requested that teachers not just teach mathematical formulas and scientific wonders, but also impart the importance of courage and hope. She also assured everyone that the DepEd remains steadfast to its commitment to continue to impart knowledge to learners with or without COVID-19.

**H.E. Mr. Nataphol Teepsuwan,
Minister of Education, Thailand**



“We have to maximise human potential to ensure the proper development of personnel, ranging from students to teachers to school principals. Each student has unique skills, and we have to support him/her to reach his/her maximum potential. Teachers help students reach their goals, but they need to be more flexible and expand their expertise. Teachers will have to be taken care of by their school principals as well to ensure their well-being and lifelong learning.”

—H.E. Mr. Nataphol

H.E. Mr. Nataphol Teepsuwan presented the efforts of the MoE to equip the necessary education personnel with skills to address COVID-19 challenges. He mentioned that the pandemic ignited the development of digital education and reforms to address learner needs amidst lock-downs. He added that countries are now facing the challenge of addressing digital requirements and reforms, which require resources. Just like other countries, Thailand is experiencing issues related to fighting digital disruptions and post-COVID education. He cited the efforts of educators in the country to help each other out during the pandemic, which can be a critical requirement to push for digital development.

Framework for Thailand’s Human Capital

Minister Nataphol gave a brief overview of the basic education system in Thailand. He mentioned that 20 years of basic education is short compared to a person’s lifelong learning journey, which continuously evolves and constantly needs to adapt to the demands of the changing world. He then shared the Thailand Education Ecosystem Model to properly develop education personnel, spanning learners, teachers, and school heads. He urged teachers to be more flexible in addressing learning needs to ensure that students reach their fullest potential. School heads, in turn, will have to look after the well-being and lifelong learning of teachers. These development goals must be supported by the government with the assistance of the private sector.

Shift to Digital Platforms

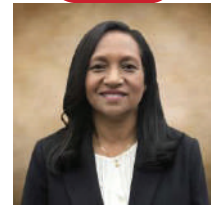
Minister Nataphol shared that the MoE earmarked resources to address the learning needs of teachers so they can shift to digital platforms while structuring their individual development plans. He also underscored the importance of measuring achievements to monitor the progress of teachers in acquiring new competencies. In a way, COVID-19 allowed the MoE to utilise more data and hasten the shift to digital platforms, as well as close the gap between disadvantaged groups. He cited that because of the lock-down, teachers will need to make up for the shortcomings of home-based education. They need to customise lessons to address learning gaps.

School Reopening

Thailand postponed the opening of more than 30,000 schools from 16 May to 1 July. During the lull, the MoE launched 17 educational television channels catering to kindergarten to twelfth-year students. Two other channels were also launched for vocational and non-formal learners. The television shows were meant to address learning gaps and meet social distancing requirements. The ministry plans to enhance the initial educational television shows to include more premium content once the pandemic is over. In the process, teachers will also become education designers, together with startup companies, as they become involved in producing learning materials.

Minister Nataphol gave the schools the flexibility to study and select the most responsive education options. He also said that the traditional way of schooling with a one-size-fits-all approach is no longer relevant in the 21st century and emphasised the need for a more agile and flexible education system that can respond to several factors, including a pandemic. He also said that this is consistent with the view of addressing the unique needs of learners to ensure that they reach their fullest potential. He further expressed his trust that together, the region will overcome the COVID-19 pandemic.

**H.E. Madam Dulçe de Jesus Soares,
Minister of Education, Youth and Sports, Timor-Leste**



“The good thing that I noticed from this effort is that we all included the vulnerable children in our responses. That is very important, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our country may have limited resources, but with the help of our colleagues’ experiences, we will try to improve our situation.”

—H.E. Madam Soares

H.E. Madam Dulçe de Jesus Soares showed a chronology of events starting with the first positive COVID-19 case reported in Timor-Leste. The MoEYS immediately implemented a one-week school holiday and afterwards, a state of emergency was declared, which resulted in the suspension of face-to-face classes. She highlighted that the ministry’s biggest dilemma was how to ensure that learning would continue, especially for the most vulnerable, in a situation where movements were restricted.

Timor-Leste’s Situation amidst COVID-19

Only 65% of households in Timor-Leste had television sets, 82% had Internet access, and 90% had mobile phones. Approximately 60% of the students live in areas classified as “remote,” “very remote,” or “extremely remote,” and had no previous experience using any distance learning strategies. Given these figures, the MoEYS expressed concern that efforts must target preschool and elementary students through the daily television programme, “Eskola Ba Uma (School at Home).” She underscored that the programme is aligned with the curriculum and currently covers basic education content and provides homework in each discipline area. She also shared that the show is aired over three national channels and the radio. To date, developments are underway to produce content for secondary school students.

Access to Educational Materials

Minister Soares then proceeded to discuss the next urgent priority—providing access to educational materials, such as books and other learning resources. She cited the help provided by the UNICEF through the website, *Learning Passport*. All materials were made available online for preschool to secondary level students after one week. She also informed everyone that the learning application, *Eskola ba Uma*, was also made available on *Google Play*.

The minister also highlighted their effort to work with telecommunications companies to provide free download and access to all materials online. Families without Internet access or television sets can use a Short Message Service system so learners can receive assignments. A free dedicated line was also included in this package that allowed students and teachers to ask questions, if necessary.

Books were also distributed to reach the remotest communities in Timor-Leste. Printed learning materials were also produced to cater to the most vulnerable, those with special education needs, and members of linguistic minority groups.

School Reopening

As the country prepares to reopen schools, the MoEYS developed a seven-point checklist for going back to face-to-face learning, which includes the following items:

- Water and hand-washing facilities
- Masks for students and teachers
- Social distancing mechanisms in classrooms
- School cleaning
- Safe place for disposing garbage
- Information materials about COVID-19
- Mandatory course on COVID-19 for school leaders and teachers

The COVID-19 lock-down afforded the MoEYS an opportunity to introduce online teacher training. Currently, the biggest challenge is lack of water and hand-washing facilities. Partners of the ministry were, however, quick to provide help so all schools can comply with the reopening criteria.

Minister Soares highlighted that the MoEYS's response was a group effort in collaboration with the country's development partners. She shared that the ministry received emergency funding from the Global Partnership for Education, which will be used to implement strategies to reopen schools and advance student learning. Initiatives include small group tutoring, hiring more teachers, encouraging greater involvement of parents in student learning, and provision of water in school.

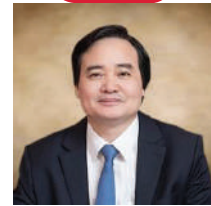
Timor-Leste did not do poorly in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, considering its circumstances. Minister Soares shared that the UNICEF rated Timor-Leste as one of the best countries in terms of accelerated educational response to COVID-19. She also shared that the pandemic opened up opportunities to accelerate and expand access to online learning and training, including building a national digital library. She also expressed hope that all countries succeed and turn the crisis into a positive experience—one that propels the education system towards excellence and equity in the future.

**H.E. Prof. Dr. Phung Xuan Nha,
Minister of Education and Training, Vietnam**



“*This pandemic is not a problem for a single country. We are trying our best to ensure the well-being and continued learning of our children. This is our common responsibility as educational officials in Asia.*”

—H.E. Prof. Dr. Phung Xuan Nha



H.E. Prof. Dr. Phung Xuan Nha shared Vietnam's experiences and expressed his desire to learn from others about policymaking. He also gave an overview of the COVID-19 situation in Vietnam where no new cases were reported for more than 60 days now.

Revising School Year Plans and Curriculum Frameworks

The MoET revised the country's school year plans and curriculum frameworks to adapt to a new time line due to COVID-19. Special attention was also given to digital transformation and switching teaching methods. Teachers also offered online classes to students while everyone was encouraged to share digital resources. For disadvantaged children who do not have access to digital devices for home-based learning, teachers developed lessons that were broadcast in more than 28 television channels while those who did not have television sets were given handouts.

Minister Phung Xuan Nha shared his belief that education managers and teachers improved their perceptions and responsibilities, as everyone willingly got involved in initiatives. Teaching went beyond the boundaries of classrooms and school campuses.

Ensuring Quality Learning

The minister shared measures to ensure quality learning and their efforts to reopen schools. First, the country ensured quality learning for all students while following social distancing guidelines. The MoET cited its success in managing national high school graduations and high-stakes examinations, which were held as planned. Second, the importance of understanding the difficulties of students was highlighted, especially those who did not return to school. Personal development pathways for these types of learners were also identified to ensure their engagement.

Minister Phung Xuan Nha also shared a sample programme that the MoET developed to support students in acquiring various academic and life skills during the lockdown.

Digital Education

Minister Phung Xuan Nha emphasised that this challenge is an opportunity to promote digital transformation in education. Thousands of video clips were made and shared by educators and these materials were compiled with subsequent plans to translate them into English so the region can learn from Vietnam's best practices.

Minister Phung Xuan Nha concluded that the pandemic is not a sole country's problem. Vietnam, through the MoET, just like other education ministries in Southeast Asia, is trying its best to ensure that the children's well-being and continued education are addressed.



Part 4

Open Discussion and Synthesis

The SMPeF successfully provided a virtual platform for SEAMEO's Education Ministers to share and discuss best practices in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions were answered by the Education Ministers through educational policies that the ministries implemented and championed to ensure that no learner is left behind, especially the marginalised and vulnerable.

The Role of Technology and Teachers amidst the Pandemic

The school closures highlighted the importance of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially since all Education Ministers mandated the shift from traditional face-to-face to flexible, blended, or online learning. Teachers have, of course, been affected by this shift, as their roles expanded from being limited to the four corners of their classrooms to the virtual realm. H.E. Dr. Radzi Jidin and H.E. Mr. Ong Ye Kung also shared their thoughts on the role of technology and the evolving roles of teachers, especially during a crisis, such as the ensuing pandemic.

MoE Malaysia's Response

Minister Radzi shared that the pandemic highlighted the crucial role of technology during a crisis. He said that technology allowed teachers to communicate with learners during the lock-down, but cautioned that students should not stay physically away from schools for prolonged periods. He echoed Minister Ong's statement that doing so will be a great injustice to children. He reiterated the importance of technology during school disruptions and opined that conscious efforts must be exerted to ensure that schools operate normally in the future, allowing learners to go back.

On the evolving role of teachers, he expressed the need to holistically assess learners to ensure that they acquire the necessary competencies and determine if interventions are needed. He called on teachers to design lessons based on their perceived learner needs and gaps that may have resulted from prolonged school closures. He also cited the need for teachers to motivate and assess learners from a socio-emotional perspective, focusing on the disadvantaged who were unable to access lessons online or reconnect with peers.

MoE Singapore's Response

Minister Ong agreed with Minister Radzi's responses and wished Malaysia all the best as it reopens schools. He added that technology is a double-edged sword. He said that using technology for learning will work if all students are ably equipped with the necessary hardware and infrastructure. However, it can be a source of inequality, as those with complete equipment, including Internet access, a computer, and resources, can easily access information. Those who are not equally equipped, meanwhile, will be at a severe disadvantage. He cited the importance of equal and equitable access to technological platforms, which could be a major boon to equality, as every learner will have an equal opportunity to access learning resources. He also shared that when Singapore adopted the circuit breaker strategy, it discovered that access was also an issue for the most vulnerable. The MoE even had to lend more than 20,000 gadgets to affected learners. Even Internet access at home became a challenge, as most less-privileged learners connected using available resources in school. Thus, to address this concern, Internet dongles were donated so that learners can gain access.

Key Takeaways

The rest of the Education Ministers also shared their key takeaways after learning how each country responded to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Below are the messages that the Education Ministers gave.

H.E. Dr. Hang Chuon Naron, MoEYS Cambodia

Minister Hang Chuon Naron shared that the safe reopening of schools remains a challenge for everyone, especially those with limited resources. He requested that SEAMEO provide a platform for sharing best practices so everyone can learn from others without the need to visit each country. He also suggested a means to evaluate school operation safety after realising that COVID-19 may linger even after this year ends.

Hon. Prof. Ainun Na'im, MoEC Indonesia

Secretary-General Ainun shared three important things. First, the pandemic sped up the process of educational transformation, which included technology use for education. Second, it stimulated and made everyone realise the importance of solidarity in terms of fighting the virus, taking care of patients, and mobilising graduate students in healthcare and related disciplines. And third, the pandemic pushed everyone in the region to focus more on the field of medicine, as the world tirelessly looks for a cure for COVID-19.

H.E. Dr. Myo Thein Gyi, MoE Myanmar

Minister Myo Thein Gyi talked about the common strategy of providing schools with resources and help look out for the safety and well-being of learners. He also emphasised the need to consider digital e-learning opportunities carefully. He cited Singapore's experience not just with e-learning, but also lifelong learning. He also applauded the efforts of every education minister to ensure that the disadvantaged, marginalised, and most vulnerable groups are not left behind.

H.E. Dr. Leonor Magtolis Briones, DepEd Philippines

Secretary Briones acknowledged the unique approaches taken by her fellow Education Ministers and shared her realisation that some of the DepEd's strategies were also applied in other countries. She reiterated the importance of communication because the roles of teachers, administrators, executives, and local governments have evolved. They now need to be more actively involved in the learning process. She underscored the need to constantly communicate with all state actors to mobilise for much-needed support. She narrated that efforts to amend the curriculum; preparing for the possible reopening of schools; crafting learning resources, such as television or radio programme scripts; and training or upskilling teachers can only be accomplished if all state actors are convinced to share the task and accountability.

H.E. Mr. Nataphol Teepsuwan, MoE Thailand

Minister Nataphol stated that digital technology and equipment are vital to education in Southeast Asia not just during the pandemic, but even post-COVID-19. As such, he suggested that all SEAMEO member countries consider buying equipment and digital technologies in bulk to get more reasonable prices. He added that having these would move education in the region forward to the 21st century and help prepare students better.

H.E. Madam Dulçe de Jesus Soares, MoEYS Timor-Leste

Minister Soares underscored the premium that all of the Education Ministers placed to ensure that no one is left behind, especially the vulnerable children who were most affected by school closures. She added that her country may have limited resources but the sharing inspired her to further improve the educational situation in Timor-Leste.

Inspirational Message

Ms. Stefania Gianini, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education, gave an inspirational message to all of the Education Ministers who joined the e-forum. She underscored the importance of partnership, e-learning, and solidarity as the only ways to navigate around the unprecedented crisis. She shared the COVID-19 events that transpired globally, which forced three-month closures and educational disruptions. Despite these, she mentioned that the months also paved the way to accelerate the transformation towards more inclusive, equitable, and relevant education with no one left behind. She shared that before the pandemic, the world was off track when it came to meeting the requirements of Sustainable Development Goal 4. She also shared that gender, social, digital, or geographical inequalities were magnified during the COVID-19 lock-down.

Assistant Director-General Gianini thanked all of the Education Ministers for being front-liners in ensuring that learning continues through developing alternative learning modalities despite the challenges posed by COVID-19. She reiterated that the innovations not only encompassed learning platforms and educational television programmes, but also online courses to support teachers, video contents, attention on children's health and well-being, and most importantly, measures to tackle disparities together.

The joint webinars it hosted with SEAMEO facilitated pure learning as well as served as repositories of OERs that focus on literacy and strengthening distance learning. These helped ensure that all teachers and learners acquire digital skills and facilitated "building back better" or the 3Bs as part of the new normal. She also thanked SEAMEO for joining the UNESCO-UNICEF rapid situation analysis on the effects and response to COVID-19 on education and noted the immediate need for data, as economies are gradually reopening despite an uncertain future, especially for education.

Three basic priorities were highlighted as the main blocks for taking common action:

- Addressing the technical connective divide and strengthening national distance learning modalities
- Reopening schools with an inclusive mindset to ensure the well-being and safety of all students and teachers, including assessing and addressing learning gaps
- Protecting educational budgets against the effects of impending recessions

Assistant Director-General Gianini concluded that the unprecedented disruptions mark the moment to re-imagine, rethink, and reform education to ensure greater resilience that transmits a sense of equity and the values of empathy and collective responsibility.

Synthesis

Dr. Valenzuela, SEAMEO Secretariat Director, provided a synthesis and summarised the e-forum by sharing her key takeaways, which require the following actions:

- Prepare learners for technological advancement and disruptions
- Develop diverse and flexible education platforms based on context
- Uplift the conditions of teachers and early childhood care and education workforces and expand training and professional development opportunities for all
- Reach out to the most disadvantaged learners and schools
- Develop the learners' fullest potentials, skills, attitudes, and values as requirements for 21st-century workers
- Improve educational infrastructure and financing schemes
- Strengthen collaboration with bilateral and multilateral partners and international organisations to meet desired educational outcomes

Dr. Valenzuela also shared the draft "Joint Statement of the Ministers of Education," which highlighted the following calls to action:

- Enhancing the capacities of teachers and key education enablers in their new and continuously evolving role vis-a-vis technology-mediated and alternative learning modalities, as the region adapts to the realities of COVID-19
- Fostering a learning environment that is quick to respond to disruption, enabling learning to continue through appropriate education solutions and technologies that best respond to the needs and contexts of each member country
- Sustaining the development and advancement of resources, such as OERs, in the region to best respond to the educational needs of every learner, wherever they may be and whatever condition they are in
- Developing strategic partnerships and alliances to ensure adequate political commitment to and investment in education for the COVID-19 recovery phase

- Promoting collaboration with national COVID-19 coalitions; regional, international, bilateral, and multilateral organisations; and partners to promote educational equity, inclusion, relevance, efficiency, and financing

Dr Valenzuela informed all of the Education Ministers that the draft joint statement has been circulated for their review and approval. A copy of the said draft is found in Annex 1.



Annex 1

Draft Joint Statement of the Ministers of Education

SEAMEO Ministerial Policy e-Forum on COVID-19 Response 18 June 2020

We, the Ministers of Education from the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) member countries gathered virtually in this historic first ministerial e-forum to share the progress made in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and show appreciation to educators and education stakeholders, as we continue to ensure that no learner is left behind, especially in these unprecedented times. We reaffirmed our commitment to move forward as one and took note of the progress made by SEAMEO in providing unconventional platforms for experts to share accurate and reliable information and appropriate technological options for member countries to adopt, especially in times of uncertainty and disruptions. We took note of the successes made in the field of education, science, and culture despite the challenges posed by the educational disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We also recognised the exemplary educational innovations launched by the ministries of education with regional partners and teachers to ensure that learning takes place whenever and wherever, regardless of medium or format. We lauded the efforts of educators as critical enablers during educational disruptions, as they consistently looked for innovations in teaching and ensured the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of learners under their care. We rediscovered the distinct voices of the youth, the marginalised, learners with special needs, and those at the borders and fringes of society and enjoined them to become co-creators of this new future, as we march on towards Society 5.0. We realised that now more than ever, cooperation and continuous linkages and partnerships remain key to complement, enhance, and maximise individual and collective strengths, as we re-imagine education and discover new possibilities. We are making a clarion call among the SEAMEO member countries, associate member countries, affiliate members, and partners to move the region forward and focus their efforts on the following:

- Enhancing the capacities of teachers and key education enablers in their new and continuously evolving role vis-a-vis technology-mediated and alternative learning modalities, as the region adapts to the realities of COVID-19

- Fostering a learning environment that is quick to respond to disruption, enabling learning to continue through appropriate education solutions and technologies that best respond to the needs and contexts of each member country
- Sustaining the development and advancement of resources, such as OERs, in the region to best respond to the educational needs of every learner, wherever they may be and whatever condition they are in
- Developing strategic partnerships and alliances to ensure adequate political commitment to and investment in education for the COVID-19 recovery phase
- Promoting collaboration with national COVID-19 coalitions; regional, international, bilateral, and multilateral organisations; and partners to promote educational equity, inclusion, relevance, efficiency, and financing

We took note of SEAMEO's multi-pronged approach not only in helping member countries by working closely with the ministries of education in Southeast Asia, but also in forging strategic alliances and partnerships with regional and international partners to advance the region's cause and make sure that our voices are heard on the global stage by being an active and productive member of the UNESCO Global Education Coalition for COVID-19 Response. We, the Ministers of Education participating in this SEAMEO Ministerial Policy e-Forum on COVID-19 Response, recommend to the SEAMEO Secretariat and the SEAMEO regional units to sustain the achievements gained in the fight against COVID-19; continue to innovate and harness appropriate technologies to improve learning outcomes; and strategically partner with international and regional organisations, partners, and stakeholders, as we transition education in the region post-COVID-19. We further acknowledge the support of the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, for making it possible to bring us all together virtually. We, therefore, agreed to adopt the SEAMEO Council's Joint Statement on Southeast Asia's Response to COVID-19 on 18 June 2020.

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