

Summary Report of the Sub-regional Webinars for South, East and Southeast Asia on the Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 in Education Sector

March 09 and March 11, 2021

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented education crisis. The uncertainty around health risks and demand for infection prevention and control measures such as physical distancing has led to massive and recurrent school closures. Governments are grappling with the complexity of providing education continuity remotely and how to enable children to safely return to school after lockdowns are lifted.

To provide relevant, effective and timely support to countries across the region, UNESCO and UNICEF have commissioned Cambridge Education to undertake a Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 in the Education Sector in Asia with the aim to:

1. Assess and estimate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector and stakeholders in the East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia sub-regions;
2. Examine policy and financial implications on progress towards achieving SDG 4-Education 2030; and
3. Identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors, which can be shared with other countries.

To present key findings of the sub-regional analysis, UNESCO, UNICEF and Cambridge Education organized two sub-regional webinars: For South Asia on March 9 and for East Asia and Southeast Asia on March 11, 2021. The webinars provided an overview of the analysis and opportunities for government officials, development partners and other education stakeholders to discuss key findings, lessons learned and recommendations from the Situation Analysis around three themes:

1. Continuity of learning and access, participation and learning during/after the pandemic
2. Safe school reopening and operations, health and well-being
3. Building back better to improve learning and increase system resilience

Following the presentation of the key findings, lessons learned and recommendations, government officials from Ministry of Education (MoE) from 18 countries across South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka), East Asia (China, Japan, Mongolia, South Korea) and Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Viet Nam) shared and presented their reactions and experiences on continuity of learning, safe school reopening and operations and building back better. To enable rich and in-depth knowledge sharing, participants were able to interact through discussion boards and online surveys integrated into the webinars.

Theme 1: Continuity of learning: access, participation and learning during/after the pandemic

The region already faced a learning crisis prior to the onset of the pandemic: A large proportion of children across the region were not able to read or understand an age-appropriate text by the age of 10 years – with large disparities between countries.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed in countries throughout the region with many still remaining closed one year after initial school closures. The extended school closures across countries in the region threatens to cause further losses in learning and exacerbate this learning crisis.

The research found that countries across the region responded remarkably quickly and successfully provided alternative provision of learning, but challenges remain, especially on reaching all children with distance learning, addressing marginalization and inequalities in learning and low levels of learning achieved during school closures. The research identified emerging best practices in addressing these challenges, identified short-, medium- and long-term recommendations and proposes a roadmap to remediate learning losses caused by school closures.

During the first discussion session of the webinars, government officials from the Ministry of Education (MoE) shared some of the emerging good practices, plans and strategies on ensuring learning and mitigate learning loss during and after the pandemic in their context¹:

- **Extending reach and ensuring inclusion:** To address challenges concerning the accessibility of distance learning during school closures, countries (Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka) implement multiple modalities of distance learning (online, TV, radio, paper-based take-home materials). Countries also report the provision of connectivity and devices (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand) and printed materials (Nepal, Sri Lanka) to facilitate access to learning during school closures for underserved communities.
- **Empowering teachers to facilitate blended learning:** Even during the closure of schools and the reliance on distance learning, teachers remain central to teaching and learning. In recognition of the new demands on teachers, countries (Maldives, Malaysia) are implementing programmes to strengthen the capacity of teachers in the planning and facilitation of blended learning.
- **Adjusting the academic calendar and curriculum:** In order to compensate for face-to-face teaching days lost as a result of school closures and in recognition of the challenges faced by many children and especially the most marginalized in accessing distance learning, countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Malaysia and Maldives) reported extending the academic calendar and reviewing and rationalizing the curriculum.
- **Assessing and remediating learning:** The importance of assessing and remediating learning after school reopening was highlighted by government officials. A number of countries (Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan) are assessing the status of learning after school closures to be able to identify learning loss and adjust teaching and learning accordingly. Countries (Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) are also implementing remediation programmes and providing resources to students to catch up learning.
- **Monitoring learning for decision making:** Countries (Bhutan, Sri Lanka) also report the establishment of continuous and systematic learning management systems to be able to monitor attendance, learning and wellbeing even during a blended mode of learning.
- **Providing financial resources to the education system:** In Nepal, the central government allocated budget to local authorities to enable the local printing of learning materials.

¹ The list of emerging practices is non-exhaustive and only reflecting the feedback of participants (mainly government officials of the respective Ministry of Education (MoEs) during the webinar. Additional examples are available in the Webinar presentations and in the Situation Analysis Sub-Regional Reports and Case Studies.

Theme 2: Safe school (re)opening and operations, health and well-being

The number of COVID-19 cases as well as the trajectory of transmissions varied widely across countries in Asia and with it the timing and duration of school closures and school reopening. The negative impact of the pandemic has not been limited to the education system, but also had and continues to have knock-on effects on household economies, health and social services.

The research emphasized that while children are less susceptible to severe illness caused by COVID-19, children are at risk of long-term health and developmental issues, educational disadvantages, child protection risks and mental health and wellbeing concerns.

The research highlighted efforts and initiatives taken by governments in ensuring the safe reopening and operations of schools in the region, but also underscored some challenges in reopening schools including the insufficient adherence to safety measures, the inadequacy of WASH facilities and the lack of real-time monitoring systems. The research also emphasized challenges around the access to health and nutrition services, stress and mental health issues and cases of child protection concerns including abuse, child labor and early marriage. The research identified emerging best practices in addressing these challenges and identified recommendations for safe school reopening and for strengthening health, wellbeing and protection services.

During the second discussion session of the webinars, government officials from the Ministry of Education (MoE) shared some of the emerging good practices, plans and strategies on the safe reopening and operations of schools²:

- **Upgrading WASH facilities:** Ministry of Educations (Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Nepal) throughout the region established new and upgraded existing WASH facilities to put in place the pre-conditions for the implementation of safe reopening and operations protocols including hand washing and disinfection.
- **Capacitating staff and students in safety measures:** Complementing the strengthening of WASH infrastructures, countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Maldives, Nepal) shared their initiatives to train school staff and students in the adherence of safety measures including social distancing, mask wearing, hygiene practices and cleaning measures. Some countries also established systems for monitoring adherence to safety measures.
- **Prioritizing children's wellbeing:** Participants emphasized the importance of students' wellbeing and mental health and the role of schools in not only promoting learning, but also the health of children. Participants (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Philippines) shared examples of recruiting additional counselors for psychosocial support and the provision school-based nutrition programmes to support the mental health and wellbeing of students.
- **Prioritizing teachers for vaccinations:** Bangladesh reported that the country prioritizes teachers for vaccinations against COVID-19 as one of its measures to increase the safety of teachers and students in schools and also to increase teacher's confidence in returning to schools.

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Theme 3: Building back better to improve learning and increase system resilience

With an increasing number of countries across the region having started or completed the reopening of schools, governments start to shift their planning focus from the immediate response to a longer-term building back better of education systems including initiatives aimed at the digital transformation of education systems, the strengthening of assessment and remediation programmes, the renewed focus on reaching the most marginalized and the rethinking of the curriculum among others.

The research found that the pandemic and prolonged school closures might result in a significant increase in children discontinuing their education. The unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19 put at risk decades of investment and progress in education and require an all government effort to build back better as well as significant increases in funding for education. The research provides an overview of the fiscal challenge faced by education systems across the region, but also identifies potential sources and opportunities for additional education funding to address funding shortfalls.

The research recognizes the great potential of technology and proposes to harness technology to move to a more blended and more flexible approach to learning for all children complementing and providing additional resources for “traditional” learning and helping to accelerate and deepen learning and mitigate learning loss.

The research proposes a new way for planning and working though prioritizing collaboration across sectors, consultation with local school communities and building on lessons learned and best practices. The research proposes priority areas for building back better a more resilient education systems including (1) Investments in building skills and capacity for teachers, (2) Reform and rationalizing of curricula, (3) Establishment of alternative learning solutions, (4) Safety of schools and prioritization of wellbeing, (5) Blended learning, (6) Use of data and the (7) Increase in education investments.

During the third discussion session of the webinars, government officials from the Ministry of Education (MoE) shared their vision and ambitions for increasing the resilience and building back better the education systems in their countries³:

- **Strengthening the digital infrastructure:** Countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Malaysia) are planning to continue to invest in strengthening the digital infrastructure and connectivity for schools and for students including through the provision of devices to children with a focus on the most marginalized in order to sustain blended learning, complement and provide children additional learning opportunities additional to “traditional” teaching and learning.
- **Investing in skills and capacity for teachers:** Recognizing the challenges faced by teachers in teaching at a distance, countries (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia) across the region are investing in enabling environment to support and strengthen teachers’ digital skills and teachers’ utilization and facilitation of blended learning.
- **Using data and monitoring systems:** Countries (Bhutan, Cambodia) are planning to establish or strengthen learning management systems to be able to monitor attendance, learning and the safe operations of schools more quickly than in the past.
- **Sustaining blended learning:** Countries across the region plan to maintain newly established distance learning modalities and continue to offer blended learning to provide students additional resources complementing face-to-face learning and to support the mitigation of learning loss.

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Further reading

- **Webinar presentations and recordings:** The recordings and presentations of both webinars for South Asia and for East Asia and Southeast Asia are available [online](#).
- **Situation Analysis Reports:** The complete research will comprise a Regional Synthesis Report, three Sub-regional Reports for South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia and 14 detailed country case studies. The final reports will also include simulations of the financial investments required to achieve SDG4 on education by 2030 considering the disruption to education systems caused by COVID-19. The final reports will be published end of March.