

The impact of COVID-19 on school feeding around the world

A Special Report from the State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020



World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
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This special report is an unplanned addition to *State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020*. When planning this report, and at the beginning of data collection in 2019, there was no intimation of what was to come.

The special report is intended to supplement the information in the *State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020* and provide specific insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected, and will continue to influence, school feeding programmes globally. The report describes current understanding of some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on schoolchildren, and how countries and development partners have sought to mitigate and cope with the associated risks, including modifying, replacing or supplementing school health and nutrition programmes. The special report also explores how these programmes, and especially school feeding, are now being used to support and accelerate the back-to-school movement as schools reopen. By the time of publication, the pandemic and the fast-moving response to it, is likely to have changed the landscape, and the reader will need to refer to contemporary information, including analyses by WFP and partners.

The closure of schools worldwide has precipitated the largest education crisis in history, with more than 1.5 billion children deprived of schooling (UNESCO, 2020b). This has implications for nearly all the world's children, immediately barring access to education and to the other benefits of the education system as a platform for delivering community services, safety nets and other critical transfers, and in the long term diminishing the prospects of a better future life. From the perspective of school feeding programmes, 370 million children in at least 161 countries were suddenly deprived of what was for many their main meal of the day (WFP, 2020c).

Increasing, inequity is a major issue: the impacts of COVID-19 are not distributed equally. For the most vulnerable children, those who rely most heavily on school meals and for whom home schooling is often least available, the negative effects of school closures could be lifelong. This not only has tragic consequences for the individual, but also lowers human capital and perpetuates the vicious cycle of poverty and inequality.

The consequences for the individual child may be direct, such as loss of access to food at school and to education, but there are also less obvious but equally severe social consequences, including greater risks of abuse and of inappropriate employment. These risks threaten girls in particular, because long-term school dropout is linked to increased child labour, child marriage and transactional sex.

At the time of writing in late 2020, it seems likely that children are not at significant health risk from the virus, nor do they play an important role in its transmission. Paradoxically, the negative impacts which children are experiencing in the name of reducing transmission seem not to be offset by health benefits for children themselves. Further research may have clarified this issue by the time this special report is published.

Countries and development partners have sought to cope with the pandemic by mitigating the most damaging effects. Plans and policies support continued learning by home schooling, through e-learning, TV and radio. The school-based platform for delivering community services and school feeding has been replaced by alternative mechanisms, such as take-home rations and cash transfers. Although humanitarian and development partners have developed guidance to help governments mitigate these consequences, coping mechanisms often exacerbate the inequities: less than 10 percent of households in Africa have access to e-learning; transfers to households do not equate with support to children, especially not girls; and even the best managed alternatives only seem able to reach less than 40 percent of the school-based programmes they replace.

As countries gain some control over the epidemic, they have begun to relax the lockdown procedures, including reopening schools and supporting “back-to-school” efforts to reverse the harm caused by school closures. However, even when schools reopen, challenges remain; and new challenges emerge, such as the reluctance of children and parents to resume school attendance. School health and nutrition programmes, especially school feeding, are now recognized as playing a key role, acting as a strong incentive for parents to send their children back to school, and for children to stay in school. Major global partnerships which support the safe reopening of schools, such as Save Our Future, are now incorporating school feeding programmes as a key element of back-to-school planning.

At the time of writing, there is a growing emphasis on the need to accelerate the safe reopening of schools and to build better and more resilient systems (Save Our Future, 2020; UNESCO et al., 2020b). There is a growing fear that the pandemic will set back global education by at least a decade, especially for the most vulnerable. The time is ripe to redefine “education”. The crisis has taught us that the education system is perhaps one of the most important pillars of communities, and fundamental to how societies are structured. Schools allow parents to go to work; they create human capital; and are platforms for community services, safety nets and other transfers. As we have witnessed the closure of schools, we realize that education is much more than textbooks and classrooms. It is time to expand the notion of education to include health and nutrition services.

SR.1 The effects of school closures on children

According to UNESCO’s monitoring reports (UNESCO, 2020b), school closures began in February 2020 in eleven countries,^a including Italy, the United Kingdom, United States and China. Most of these school closures were countrywide and affected all schools and learning centres, but some countries implemented localized school closures, depending on internal risk factors and domestic governance structures, particularly in areas affected more severely by the virus. By 14 April 2020, 199 countries had school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic (192 countrywide and 7 localized), leaving 1.6 billion learners out of school (UNESCO, 2020b).

a. Countries with school closures as of 29 February 2020: Bahrain, China, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Mongolia, Pakistan, San Marino, UK, USA and Vietnam.

Building on UNESCO monitoring data and WFP's own global monitoring of school feeding programmes, it was estimated that, by April 2020, 370 million schoolchildren were missing out on their daily meals in school in at least 161 countries (WFP, 2020c). WFP implements school feeding programmes in 52 of the countries which reported partial or countrywide closures of schools, and where over 12 million children were affected (WFP, 2020c). These children are targeted by school feeding programmes because they are often already nutrient-deficient, vulnerable or otherwise at risk. For many children, the food provided at school is the only meal they consume in a day and is the largest single contribution to their daily nutrient requirements (WFP et al., 2020). Map SR.1 shows the number of children affected as of April 2020.

In many countries, alternatives to learning and school feeding were implemented by governments and partners during school closures. Lessons were taught online where possible, and school meals were replaced by take-home rations or cash transfers. Section SR.2 elaborates on some of the different responses worldwide and alternatives implemented to replace school health and nutrition programmes, including school feeding.

School closures as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic have affected many children around the world, and they are among the most affected victims of the pandemic. It is unclear how important schools are to the transmission of the virus among children or from children to teachers; it seems likely that the role of schools is much less prominent with this virus than with seasonal influenza, for example (Viner et al., 2020). Children appear to have few direct health consequences from COVID-19 and appear to play little role in the transmission of the virus (Ludvigsson 2020a, 2020b; Rajmil, 2020). While closing schools may have seemed important in the short term to reduce transmission of COVID-19, it presents an unprecedented risk to children, who are now facing adverse effects on their learning, safety, health and well-being (WFP et al., 2020), thereby affecting a country's overall human capital (Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2020).

This is a universal crisis and, for some children, the impact will be lifelong (United Nations, 2020a). However, these negative impacts will not be distributed equally: "They are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, and in the poorest neighbourhoods, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations" (United Nations, 2020a, p. 2). The risks for children during this pandemic include: families falling into deeper poverty; threats to survival, health and child safety; and exacerbating the learning crisis^b (United Nations, 2020a).

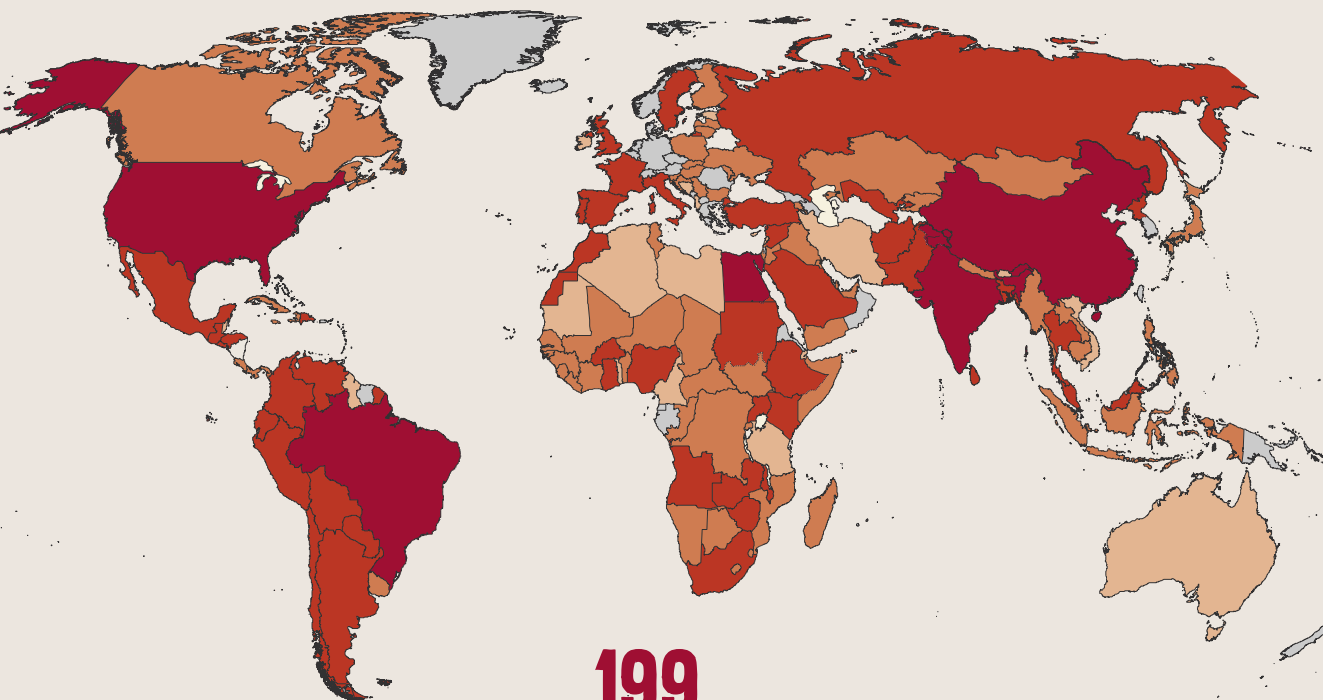
The closure of schools worldwide precipitated the largest education crisis in history, with more than 1.5 billion children suddenly deprived of schooling.

b. The Learning Crisis refers to global concerns that despite increases in the number of children enrolled in school, over 50 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read proficiently by age 10. For more information: <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/reports/addressing-learning-crisis>

Map SR.1

WFP global monitoring of school meals during COVID-19 school closures (data as of 14 April 2020)

Legend: COVID-19 caused 199 countries to close their schools, thereby depriving 370 million children from school meals. In 52 countries where WFP operates school feeding programmes, 12 million children were affected.



199
COUNTRIES WITH
SCHOOL CLOSURES

**Number of
affected
schoolchildren**

- > 10 million**
- 1 - 10 million**
- 0.1 - 1 million**
- < 0.1 million**
- Schools open**
- No data**

370 MILLION
CHILDREN
MISSING OUT ON SCHOOL
MEALS GLOBALLY



— International Boundary - - - - - Armistice or International Administrative Line
- - - - - Other Line of Separation - - - - - Special boundary line

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The World Bank (2020d) describes the learning and health and safety impacts on children due to COVID-19 and school closures as follows:

- For most children, academic learning will come to a halt. Evidence suggests that time out of school can lead to learning losses that continue to accumulate after schools reopen. For instance, in the current crisis, if a quarter of the school year is lost due to school closures, the number of 10-year-old children in learning poverty in Brazil will rise by an estimated 84,000 (or 6 percent) even if the learning losses stop when schools reopen (World Bank, 2020a).
- Early childhood education and foundational learning in early primary school are negatively impacted. This is a very important period for child development: if children fail to acquire foundational skills at this stage, they may find it much more difficult to learn later (Crouch and Gove, 2011).
- Learning inequality will increase. School closures exacerbate the already high levels of learning inequality in many low- and middle-income systems. The more educated and wealthy families are, the more likely they are to sustain their children's learning at home and are more likely to have the necessary equipment, books and other resources. This means that when schooling restarts, disadvantaged children will find themselves even further behind their peers (World Bank, 2020d).
- Attachment to schooling may also fall. School closures can lead some children and youth to disengage and reduce their attendance. "Children who were already tenuously connected to school could be further discouraged, making them especially vulnerable to dropping out as the economic shock hits" (World Bank, 2020d). Additionally, the number of out-of-school children with disabilities is likely to increase, as persons with disabilities face higher rates of multidimensional poverty (Mitra et al., 2013).
- Student nutrition and physical health are compromised. Children who rely on school feeding programmes as a primary source of nutrition may go hungry, and school closures also shut down access to crucial health programmes such as deworming, affecting as many as 456 million children in many low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2019b).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought an end to a decade of global growth in school feeding programmes and has sharpened global resolve to restore access to these vital safety nets as a priority.

Student dropout levels could rise, with many students leaving schooling forever. “Widespread unemployment and income loss will severely test households’ ability to pay to keep students in school...(and) for the poorest households, budget constraints may cause them to keep their children out of school even when schools reopen” (World Bank, 2020d, p. 14). The longer marginalized children are out of school, the less likely they are to return, particularly girls. Additionally, “school dropout is linked with increased child labour, child marriage, and even transactional sex for children and adolescents” (World Bank, 2020d, p. 15). In Africa, adolescent girls out of school are on average twice as likely to start childbearing than those who are in school (United Nations, 2020a).

As shown by the State of Food Security and Nutrition 2020 report (SOFI 2020) (FAO et al., 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has already led to significant consequences for food security, affecting both supply and demand, with long-lasting consequences for hunger. The crisis is expected to increase levels of malnutrition in all its forms, especially for children: “the massive lockdowns across the world are expected to hamper people’s ability to access food and create serious economic downturns...as a consequence, a pandemic-induced global economic crisis is likely to generate new pockets of food insecurity even in countries that did not require interventions previously” (FAO et al., 2020).

As a result, the SOFI 2020 report recommends to “scale-up double-duty actions in the COVID-19 response to reduce negative impacts on food security and nutrition (e.g. exclusive breastfeeding promotion, maternal nutrition and antenatal care programmes, adapted school feeding programmes, food and agriculture policies that support healthy diets, universal healthcare)” (FAO et al., 2020).

The UN Secretary-General has written that “as the world faces unsustainable levels of inequality, we need education – the great equalizer – more than ever” and has issued a Policy Brief calling for action in four key areas (United Nations, 2020b):

1. Reopening schools safely. Once local transmission of COVID-19 is under control, getting students back into schools and learning institutions as safely as possible must be a top priority.
2. Prioritizing education in financing decisions. Before the crisis hit, low- and middle-income countries already faced an education funding gap of US\$1.5 trillion a year. This gap has now grown.
3. Targeting the hardest to reach. Education initiatives must seek to reach those at greatest risk of being left behind – people in emergencies and crises; minority groups of all kinds; displaced people and those with disabilities.
4. The future of education is here. This is a generational opportunity to reimagine education. It is possible to take a leap towards forward-looking systems that deliver quality education for all as a springboard for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



SR.2 Mitigation and coping: reducing the impact of school closures

Mitigation or coping is an intermediate step to minimize the negative effects of school closures on children until schools reopen, which is ultimately the only long-term solution. Countries have made very substantial efforts to cope with the crisis, providing alternative ways to deliver education outside of school (variants of distance learning, such as online, TV and radio) and various forms of food or cash transfers to households. Evaluation of these measures is under way, and initial results suggest that they do provide benefits, but are much less equitable than school-based interventions. For example, given that less than 10 percent of students in Africa can access online learning, the digital divide remains real (World Bank, 2020d), and strong efforts by WFP to replace school meals with take-home rations in the most affected communities, have reached about 6.9 million children (WFP, 2020e) out of the 17 million children assisted in normal circumstances.

SR.2.1 What countries are doing in response to the crisis

To support these mitigation responses, WFP developed a global dashboard and map as a public good to monitor school closures around the world; the number of children missing out on school meals; and up-to-date information on what governments are doing to support out-of-school children (WFP, 2020c).

More than 70 countries have tried various approaches to providing distance education as a means of mitigating the loss of education at school (World Bank, 2020d). In responding to the absence of school-based provision of meals, a number of different modalities were employed to substitute the daily meal that children previously received at school. These alternatives include: take-home rations, cash and alternative hot meals. Table SR.1 presents some of the alternative mechanisms implemented by countries worldwide.

At the height of the crisis, 199 countries had closed their schools and 370 million children were suddenly deprived of what for many was their main meal of the day.

As of June 2020, 75 percent of countries where WFP had previously implemented school feeding reported the adoption of alternative mechanisms to on-site school feeding, reaching 6.9 million vulnerable children in low-income countries. Of these, 31 countries reported the use of take-home rations; 6 reported the use of cash-based transfers; and 3 countries implemented a combination of modalities depending on the local situation, including home delivery and the provision of cash or vouchers (WFP, 2020c). In countries where schools remained open, country offices worked with partners to improve access to water and sanitation, ensuring that proper hygiene, food safety and quality standards were being met. Social distancing measures were also employed to reduce the risk of infection. Table SR.2 describes some examples of national school closure mitigation responses supported by WFP.

Table SR.1
Examples of alternative mechanisms to school feeding implemented by governments globally

Take-home rations	<p>South Africa: The Western Cape provincial government allocated 18 million Rand (US\$958,000) to provide take-home food rations to the 483,000 learners that are part of the province’s School Nutrition Programme.</p>
	<p>Japan: From April 2020, the Osaka Municipal Government provided free lunches for all students attending public primary and elementary schools to cushion the financial burden on families.</p>
Cash-based transfers	<p>Brazil: The government allocated R\$3 billion (US\$537 million) for the Bolsa Familia by adding one million families to the programme. In order to maintain the National School Feeding Programme (PNAE), the Brazilian government authorized the distribution of purchased foodstuffs to students’ families in the form of kits.</p>
	<p>France: On 15 April, the government announced a one-off payment of EUR 100 per child to mitigate the financial burden for the most vulnerable families. The municipalities of Marseille, Paris, Brest, and Haute-Garonne announced cash transfers or food stamps to mitigate the unavailability of school meals. In the county of Meurthe-et-Moselle, local authorities decided to deliver school meals to the homes of the most vulnerable children enrolled in middle schools.</p>
	<p>United Kingdom: By 31 March 2020, the government formally launched a national voucher scheme to ensure that the 1.3 million school-age children eligible will continue to have access to meals during COVID-19-induced school closures. Under the scheme, each school-age child received a £15 (US\$19.4) per week voucher (equivalent to £3 [US\$3.9] per day), with the vouchers being redeemable at all major supermarkets. The value of the vouchers exceeded the costs of free school meals, as the government recognized the increased costs placed on parents given that they would not be purchasing food in bulk and therefore will incur higher costs.</p>

Other modalities	<p>Spain: On 12 March 2020, the government announced that children in pre-primary, primary and secondary school that are part of Autonomous Communities (subnational entities) would receive continued access to food. The government earmarked funding worth EUR 25 million for food support to vulnerable children. The payment modality will either be in cash, in-kind (i.e. food delivery at home or at food distribution points) or voucher-based transfers.</p>
	<p>Trinidad and Tobago: The government provided children enrolled in the national school feeding programme with a temporary food support card, particularly for families that are not already covered by another national food support programme. This measure reached 2,050 households, and the food support cards were valued at 510 Trinidad and Tobago dollars (US\$75 per household).</p>

Table SR.2
Examples of national school closure mitigation responses supported by WFP

Asia and the Pacific	<p>Bangladesh: Delivery of two months-worth (50 packets) of fortified biscuits for each student in households across 104 subdistricts. In parallel, WFP has developed awareness material on nutrition and COVID-19 hygiene practices to accompany distributions.</p>
	<p>Cambodia: WFP worked with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) to use food stock balances in schools and in the WFP warehouse as take-home rations for children enrolled in school meal programmes. Approximately 104,000 students from 908 primary schools in five provinces were reached.</p>
Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia	<p>Armenia: In partnership with the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports (MoESCS), efforts were focused on restarting support to the 100,000 schoolchildren nationwide who had not been able to receive school meals during the initial school closures.</p>
	<p>Kyrgyz Republic: Additional support provided to rural families. More than 53,000 primary schoolchildren and their families received up to 4 kg of wheat flour as take-home rations.</p>
	<p>Syria: WFP and UNICEF provided joint vouchers (food and hygiene items) for 44, 000 children.</p>
	<p>Afghanistan: UNICEF and WFP agreed on a joint COVID-19 approach for continuity of nutrition interventions and education.</p>
West and Central Africa	<p>Chad: A COVID-19 country strategic plan included school feeding, with the distribution of take-home rations to 120,000 vulnerable students affected by food insecurity and population movements.</p>
	<p>Guinea: Take-home rations were distributed to 150,000 schoolchildren to mitigate the effects of school closures on vulnerable children's food and nutrition needs.</p>
	<p>Niger: Support to the government was provided to ensure that 150,000 children receive take-home rations and that 13,000 girls receive cash grants.</p>

Southern Africa	Madagascar: Take-home rations were distributed to ensure that the 200,000 assisted pupils kept receiving school meals.
	Malawi: Three-month take-home rations in the form of in-kind or cash-based transfers were distributed for the 600,000 pupils who were at home after the closure of schools.
East Africa	Somalia: Take-home rations were distributed in Somaliland, Puntland, and Galkayo from the stocks in schools at the time of school closures.
	South Sudan: WFP and UNICEF prepared a joint project targeting 400,000 children with a School Health and Nutrition package and COVID-19 messaging in schools.
	Ethiopia: A take-home ration activity was launched, targeting 272,000 children's families. Each received a basket of cereals, pulses, vegetable oil and salt for the months June, July and August 2020.
Latin America and the Caribbean	Bolivia: Take-home rations were distributed in support of over 5,000 school-age girls and boys in the town of Entre Rios.
	Haiti: Take-home food rations were distributed in 93 percent of the participating schools, using the food stocks already available.
	Nicaragua: WFP and UNICEF submitted a US\$1 million proposal to the Multi-Partner Trust Fund to support the Ministry of Education's strategy for distance learning.

SR.2.2 Available guidance on mitigation and coping mechanisms

The rapid spread of the pandemic and the immediacy of school closures has required similarly rapid responses from countries. This section summarizes some of the guidance that has been developed in response to this demand. Monitoring and evaluation is a component of these interventions, but there has not yet been sufficient time to rank the utility of the different responses.

WFP, along with FAO and UNICEF (WFP et al., 2020), developed a guidance note for governments to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly relating to food and nutrition for schoolchildren. The note includes recommendations for contexts in which schools have closed and where they remain open. Table SR.3 summarizes the recommendations listed in the guidance.

An interim guidance note for COVID-19 prevention and control in schools was developed by UNICEF, WHO and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) to provide clear and actionable guidance for safe operations through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in schools and other educational facilities (UNICEF et al., 2020). According to the note, "maintaining safe school operations or reopening schools after a closure requires many considerations but, if done well, can promote public health" (UNICEF et al., 2020). The note provides key messages and checklists for school staff, parents/caregivers and community members, to ensure the safety and protection of children and of educational facilities. "Measures taken by schools can prevent the entry and spread of COVID-19 by students and staff who may have been exposed to the virus, while minimizing disruption and protecting students and staff from discrimination" (UNICEF et al., 2020). The broad range of advice and guidance about responding to the COVID-19 pandemic is listed in Annex II.

Table SR.3

Summary of policy recommendations to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food and nutrition of schoolchildren

Guidance note by FAO, WFP and UNICEF (2020)

When schools are closed	Where schools remain open
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain flexibility and responsiveness to changing conditions for supply and distribution of food and provision of nutrition services, while ensuring compliance with COVID-19 protocols. • Use available resources to safeguard schoolchildren's food security and nutrition. • Build upon existing safety-net structures to cover vulnerable schoolchildren. • Ensure food and nutrition needs of vulnerable schoolchildren are considered when designing any large-scale national response to COVID-19. • Plan for the future reopening of schools, if possible with specific benchmarks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comply with COVID-19 prevention protocols. • Promote optimal water, sanitation and hygiene services and ensure optimal hygiene and other key behaviours of children, teachers and food service staff/volunteers, school canteens and regulation of food vendors. • Ensure and continue the provision of essential school health and nutrition package (school feeding, micronutrient supplementation, deworming, malaria prevention and oral hygiene). • Avoid potential deterioration in food safety standards. • Ensure adequate nutrition content of meals. • Create contingency plans for the distribution of meals/food baskets in preparation for potential rapid closure of schools.

In May 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres called on governments and donors to prioritize education for all children, including the most marginalized. In response, the Global Education Coalition led by UNESCO was established to support governments in strengthening distance learning and facilitating the safe reopening of schools. Multilateral partners, including UNICEF, WHO, the World Bank, WFP, and the International Telecommunication Union, as well as GPE, ECW and the Asian Development Bank have joined the coalition, emphasizing the need for partnership action and swift and coordinated support to countries to mitigate the adverse impacts of school closures, in particular for the most disadvantaged (UNESCO, 2020a).

The creation of this coalition helped provide a platform for supporting countries' mitigation responses, and also led to the more coordinated development of the next phase of action: the back-to-school movement.

SR.3 Back to school: what countries need to do next

An important lesson from this crisis is the realization of how important the education system is for the normal functioning of our societies. Coping and mitigation have been vitally important while schools are closed, but even the best efforts fall far short of the coverage and equity of the school-based approaches that they sought to replace. The focus now is on moving quickly to reopen schools safely (UNESCO et al., 2020b).

As schools reopen, the priority is to provide a safe school environment (UNESCO et al., 2020b), and then for children to return to school in pre-COVID-19 numbers and to help them regain their health and nutrition after the rigours of lockdown and exclusion. As countries and development partners explore the realities of what is required, three key elements of back-to-school plans have emerged:

- Create a safe environment which minimizes the risks of COVID-19 transmission among children and from children to staff.
- Put in place school health and nutrition services which promote the health and well-being of children and, through provision of school feeding, offer an incentive for children to go to school and for parents to send them to school.
- Build an education system that uses the stimulus of the crisis as an opportunity to build a stronger and more equitable system.

While there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic and these shocks to education and school health and nutrition will have immediate costs to our societies, countries can mitigate the damage if they act quickly through adequate planning and policies to support continued learning, and health and nutrition services for schoolchildren. This crisis could, therefore, become an opportunity to build more inclusive, efficient and resilient education systems (World Bank, 2020d). See Box 5.1 for a summary of what WFP has learned from the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of school feeding and education.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the adverse effects it is having on the world's children, is showing us that the education system is fundamental to our communities and for our societies. Schools contribute to the development of human capital, while providing opportunities to address inequality and poverty. They serve as platforms for community services; health and nutrition services for children; safety nets; and allow parents to go to work. It is more important than ever to expand the notion of education, including through the enhancement and scale-up of health and nutrition services for children.

School closures have highlighted the importance of school feeding as a social safety net.

A *Framework for reopening schools* (UNESCO et al., 2020a) was developed by UNESCO, WFP, the World Bank and UNICEF, recognizing that leaders across countries are grappling with difficult and uncertain trade-offs as they consider easing lockdowns. The framework aims to inform the decision-making process on the timing to reopen schools; support national preparations; and guide the implementation process, as part of overall public health and education planning processes.

According to the framework, the following main steps need to be taken to reopen schools safely (UNESCO et al., 2020a):

- Initially, a rapid assessment of the associated benefits and risks of reopening schools should be carried out by decision makers along with subnational stakeholders. This should be informed by cross-sectoral and context-specific evidence, including education, public health and socioeconomic factors.
- When schools have been identified for reopening, six key dimensions should be used to assess their states of readiness and to inform planning: policy, financing, safe operations, learning, reaching the most marginalized and well-being/protection.
- Prior to reopening schools, critical plans and mechanisms are needed to improve schooling, with a focus on safe operations, including strengthening remote learning practices. Protocols should be developed on hygiene measures, environmental cleaning, social distancing, school feeding schedules, etc. Teachers should be trained and supported in online learning, and alternative academic calendars could be considered.
- From a public health perspective, as schools start reopening, there are three fundamental areas that should be considered: (i) mechanisms to prevent infections such as hygiene and environmental cleaning to limit exposure; (ii) mechanisms to screen for infections by training teachers and school administrators on COVID-19 preventative measures and basic case management; and (iii) mechanisms to isolate students or staff who show signs of infection by ensuring the availability of a designated room or separate area, while measures are taken to transport the person to a health care facility and trace potentially exposed individuals.

In January 2020, at the Davos World Economic Forum, WFP and UNICEF launched a partnership on school health and nutrition, to provide a framework and programme of cooperation to ensure that millions of vulnerable school-age children receive the health and nutrition support they need to learn and to thrive (UNICEF and WFP, 2020). This was originally a scheme to combine the strengths of WFP in delivering school feeding with the strengths of UNICEF in delivering school health and school-based WASH interventions; however, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented an opportunity to also provide a two-pronged strategy to respond to the medium-term needs of learners during and after the pandemic through interventions during school closures and a joint back-to-school campaign.

The World Bank also developed a list of policies to turn this crisis into an opportunity to strengthen the world's education and school health and nutrition provision, which can be grouped into three overlapping phases: coping; managing and continuity; and improving and accelerating (World Bank, 2020d). The World Bank also supports a two-pronged response. As schools close, the first phase is mitigation, and the priority should be to protect student health and safety; prevent lost learning opportunities; and guarantee alternative mechanisms to deliver school health and nutrition services. Second, it is imperative that schools reopen safely and dropouts are minimized; and the crisis is used as an opportunity to build stronger and more equitable education systems (World Bank, 2020d).

In early August 2020, the Save Our Future global campaign was launched by the UN Secretary-General, together with the Policy Brief on Education during COVID-19 and beyond to protect and reimagine education in a post-COVID-19 world. The movement, supported by hundreds of organizations worldwide, is a global coalition of diverse voices uniting to call for world leaders to prioritize education in the response to COVID-19, highlighting concerns that the pandemic has exacerbated already existing inequalities and magnified the global learning crisis (Save Our Future, 2020). As part of the Save Our Future campaign, the coalition is identifying key actions and recommendations for global decision makers on protecting education amid COVID-19. While recognizing that there are many actions which could improve education, governments will need to prioritize the most effective interventions for the most left-behind children to avoid a catastrophe.

Some of the extensive policy and technical guidance relating to the “back to school” campaign can be accessed via Annex II.

While the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the lives of the most vulnerable populations, it also gave WFP the opportunity to reflect on its current delivery of programmes (see Box 5.1). Some key lessons learned include:

- looking beyond the immediate crisis, aiming to address the long-term consequences of the pandemic on global food systems, and ensuring that children have incentives to return to school;
- expansion and scale-up of new programme modalities, such as centralized kitchens and voucher systems to build more flexible school feeding programmes; and
- strengthening partnerships with UN agencies, NGOs and the private sector, especially as part of a broader education response.

SR.4 The way forward

- Recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures threaten to have lifelong impacts on the most vulnerable children, affecting their learning, health and nutrition, thereby hampering human capital and development globally, efforts should be taken to reopen schools safely, and build better and more resilient school systems, while having systems in place to mitigate the risks of school closures more quickly. Guidance and support to countries on mitigation measures, policy response and back-to-school incentives, including access to financing, will continue to be the priority for WFP and development agencies, particularly in dealing with the crisis and ensuring that children continue to receive support should schools continue to be closed. WFP and UNICEF will also implement a back-to-school campaign to ensure children return to school.
- School feeding and school health and nutrition interventions will be used to incentivize households to send children back to school and keep them healthy and well-nourished. This crisis could serve as an opportunity to build more inclusive, efficient and resilient education systems, and for school health and nutrition services to be scaled up appropriately, leveraging cross-sectoral partnerships. Guidelines, policy briefs and technical support will provide direction to countries and partners to plan adequately and implement solutions to ensure schoolchildren continue to be supported through health and nutrition services, both during the pandemic and as the world's education systems adapt to new approaches, including distance learning.
- Future game-changers: Three recent developments may significantly affect school closure policy by the time this report is published. First, the mass roll-out of licensed vaccines, although none is yet available for children, may attenuate or halt the epidemic. Second, the emergence of variant virus strains, some of which may be more transmissible among children, will swing the policy towards closing schools to reduce community transmission. Third, the increasing socioeconomic evidence that the long-term cost of lost education outweighs the health benefits of school closure, will encourage policy towards the reopening of schools. The relative importance of these three factors is likely to determine the future impact of COVID-19 on school feeding programmes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to expand the concept of education, and to build back equitable, quality school-based health and nutrition services.

State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020

Healthy and well-nourished children learn better. One of the most important human capital investments that a country can make is to support the health, nutrition and learning of its children. This publication by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) provides an analysis of how countries across the world are supporting their children through effective school feeding programmes.

In 2013, WFP published the first edition of *State of School Feeding Worldwide*, the first ever global snapshot of school feeding programmes. This 2020 version follows a similar format, using the best available data sources to describe key aspects of coverage, implementation practices and costs of programmes worldwide. This second edition seeks to analyse the direction and scale of change between 2013 and 2020. The award of the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize has further strengthened WFP's commitment to deliver on the 10-year strategy *A Chance for Every Schoolchild*.

The 2020 edition is being published with an even greater sense of urgency as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 brought an end to a near-decade of sustained global growth in school feeding programmes. At the height of the crisis, 199 countries had closed their schools and 370 million children were suddenly deprived of their daily school meal. This shock has highlighted the importance of school feeding as a social safety net, and has sharpened global resolve to restore access to education and to create school-based programmes that can play a stronger role in protecting the health and nutrition of children.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, national school feeding programmes delivered school meals to one in every two schoolchildren every school day, more than at any time in human history. This publication examines how this most extensive social safety net in the world was created, and explores how countries can build-back-better and re-establish effective school feeding programmes.

The full publication is available online at www.wfp.org



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