#AllmeansALL: Putting learner diversity at the heart of education post Covid-19

Inclusion means both enacting policies that allow for the widest range/profile of learners to be included in schools and ensuring that conditions in schools are welcoming, regardless of identity, background or ability.

Identity, background and ability dictate children's education chances more than ever before

Never before have so many children affected by school closures. Even before COVID-19, estimates showed that only 25% of the poorest girls in low-income countries completed primary school and 258 million children and youth were out of school. The arrival of COVID-19 has exacerbated already existing inequalities and risks seeing more children further marginalised and at risk of dropping-out. A reliance on online learning has increased discrimination against many marginalised communities. There is a real chance that the impact of COVID-19 will see progress towards SDG 4 not only stagnate, but risk going in reverse, particularly as governments and international donors put education further down their list of budget priorities as they scramble to respond to the pandemic.

The 2020 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, *All means all,* published by UNESCO, calls for countries to concentrate on those being left behind and move towards inclusion in education. It calls for education to be built for all, not a few, and provides policy makers with 10 recommendations for the 10 years left in the Decade of Action before the deadline of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This document demonstrates their relevance in the context of COVID-19, demonstrating their worth as a guiding framework for those rebuilding their education systems after the pandemic.

COVID-19 has pushed inequalities in education to breaking point:

- Only 47% households in developing countries and 12% in the least developed countries have internet access at home. Globally, almost a third of students from pre-primary to upper secondary schools were not reached due to either lack of remote learning policies or lack of technology (UNICEF, 2020). Even low-technology approaches cannot ensure learning continuity. Among the poorest 20% of households, 7% owned a radio in Ethiopia and 8% in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2020 GEM Report)
- Learners with disabilities are at higher risk of exclusion in such circumstances Even before the pandemic, children with a sensory, physical or intellectual disability were 2.5 times more likely to have never been in school as their peers without disabilities (2020 GEM Report).
  Children with disabilities may need additional support, depending on their disability—for example, simplified messages and sign language support to understand health and safety measures. In some instances, parents and families are not able to support their children in using sign language or Braille texts. (World Bank)
- More time at home exposes girls and young women to domestic chores, sexual violence or teenage pregnancy risks. Estimates suggest that globally, 13 million more child marriages

could take place by 2030 than would have otherwise (UNFPA), while it is estimated that 11 million girls (UNESCO) and up to 50% of secondary school refugee girls may not return to school (Malala Fund, 2020).

- More than 75 million children across the world's crisis and conflict-affected countries already urgently required support to access quality education. In addition to the 60% of all refugees and 80% of all internally displaced persons who live in urban areas, millions of forcibly displaced people are living in overcrowded, under-resourced refugee and internal displacement sites with poor hygiene and sanitation facilities, and limited access to learning opportunities.
- Since April, about 370 million children have missed out on meals and essential health services due to school closures, increasing hunger and nutritional deficiencies for the most disadvantaged. 47% of children missing out on school meals globally are girls (WFP UNICEF, 2020).
- School closures are a potential cause of increased child labour during the pandemic (ILO, 2020).
  Stay-at-home orders mean that many LGBTI children and young people have been subjected to an increased risk of domestic violence, family violence, sexual and psychological abuse, and other forms of violence (OHCHR, 2020).

A failure to prioritise the needs of the most marginalised in responses to Covid-19 risks entrenching disadvantages even further

The pandemic has magnified digital, learning, social, gender and geographical inequalities, with about 40% of low- and lower-middle-income countries not supporting learners at risk of exclusion during school-shutdowns, such as the poor, linguistic minorities and learners with disabilities (GEM Report, 2020).

Building back more inclusive education systems that are more resilient in the face of such crises calls for **learner diversity to be a strength that is celebrated**. Inclusive education is the foundation of an education system of good quality that enables every child, youth and adult to learn and fulfil their potential, no matter their background, identity or gender. Now more than ever, governments must put inclusion front and centre of their policies. As Covid-19 deepens the learning crisis, education budgets must be protected and focus must be placed on the most marginalised children.

GEM Report recommendation	Relevance to the post-Covid-19 education agenda
Widen the understanding of inclusive education: It should include all learners, regardless of identity, background or ability	COVID-19 has confirmed and exposed inherent inequalities in education, but also presented an opportunity to address these disparities by applying an equity lens to governments' plans to rebuild the sector. Governments should respect the no harm principle in their COVID education responses. No solution can be considered good if it leaves some groups of learners out. Many of the solutions tested during the pandemic have focused on just some constituencies without regard for the marginalized.
Target financing to those left behind: There is no inclusion while millions lack access to education	Recovery packages without education don't hold ground. Education budgets must not just be maintained but also increased, with funds targeted at those most likely to be further marginalised by the pandemic. Current estimates show that total aid to education is likely to decline by 12% by 2022 due to the economic consequences of COVID-19 (GEM Report Policy paper 41). Additional costs due to Covid-19 related school closures risk increasing the financing gap for education of $148 billion a year by one-third (GEM Report policy paper 42).

Household incomes are also at risk due to the economic crisis, pushing likely over 100 million into extreme poverty and reducing the amount available to spend on education. This hits hardest the intersection of poor marginalized children at the bottom of the privilege matrix (Source).

Governments need a twin-track approach that allocates general funding to foster an inclusive learning environment for all learners, as well as targeted funding to follow the furthest behind with remediation programmes as early as possible.

Currently only 47% of donor funds go to basic education in low and lower-middle income countries. [GEM Report policy paper 41], despite evidence showing that emphasis on the early years in early childhood and primary education are the best investments for addressing inequality.

Evidence from 42 countries shows that, on average, around 16 percent of public education spending goes towards the poorest 20 percent of children in school, compared to 26 percent that goes towards the wealthiest 20 percent of children in school. This spending gap is even more pronounced in low-income countries, where as little as 10 percent of public education expenditure goes to the poorest 20 percent of learners, while 38 percent goes to the richest 20 percent of learners (UNICEF, 2020).

Non-education financing policies are critical. Social protection programmes, such as conditional cash transfers or child grants with an education component that aim to address poverty, for instance with a gender dimension, are particularly important to prevent the marginalised, and particularly girls, from dropping out of school |

	altogether. Schools provide far more than just education. For many children, schools are a lifeline to safety, health services and nutrition. For many children, schools are a lifeline to safety, health services and nutrition. 370 million children worldwide missed out on school meals and health services during school closures ([WFP UNICEF, 2020](#)). While planning the safe re-opening of schools, school health and nutrition services, such as school feeding and psychological and socio-emotional support must be continued to help prevent and mitigate exclusion and serve as a powerful incentive for children to return to school.
Share expertise and resources: This is the only way to sustain a transition to inclusion	Human and material resources to address diversity are scarce. Historically they have been concentrated in a few places as a legacy of segregated provision by ability or migration status. In hybrid models of education, with remote and face to face teaching, a more flexible use of specialist resources should be promoted, such as via resource centres or with itinerant specialist teachers, who could work alongside community workers. School pairing could also help share positive practices between high and low performing schools and qualified teachers could be reallocated at a local level.

Mechanisms and incentives are needed to move them flexibly to ensure that specialist expertise supports all schools and non-formal settings, and particularly those that serve the most disadvantaged ([GEM Report, 2020](#)). Formalisation of the status of refugee teachers would also support educational inclusion and diversity in the teaching force. |
| **Engage in meaningful consultation with communities and parents: Inclusion cannot be enforced from above.** | A safe return to schools needs to consider the views of teachers, students, caregivers and parents and address and counter the anxiety, stress, and feelings of insecurity regarding the community's health and wellbeing.

While some ministries have sought to engage teachers, students, parents and communities in dialogue on back to school plans, more public debate should be encouraged on new hybrid learning models and returning to school in a safe and equitable manner after school closures. This is particularly critical in the context of COVID-19 for children at risk, where consultations can support the most marginalised to return to school and ensure they are catching up effectively on learning. |
| **Ensure cooperation across government departments, sectors and tiers: Inclusion in education is but a subset of social inclusion** | Ministries sharing administrative responsibility for more inclusive education must collaborate on identifying needs, exchanging information and designing programmes to ensure learning continuity during the pandemic. Vertical coordination across different levels of government is also essential. Ministries of education at the national and sub-national levels should work closely together in a coordinated response for planning, preparing and implementing a safe school reopening ([UNESCO et al., 2020](#)). |

	Close coordination with child protection services, social affairs and health ministries is essential for identifying and mitigating risks around disease control and for ensuring school reopening measures consider the special needs of learners with disabilities or the vulnerabilities of women and girls. Childcare is the foundation of opportunities, for children as well as parents, and particularly for front-line workers, including teachers. Coordination with social affairs ministries can help to respond to the childcare needs of families while fostering opportunities to return on the labour market and preventing inequality from deepening.
Make space for non-government actors to challenge and fill gaps: They must also make sure they work towards the same inclusion goal	Non-government organizations working at the intersection of education and inclusion provide urgent support and targeted interventions of the most vulnerable learners and should be seen as central partners to governments tasked with COVID-19 education plans. For example, NGOs are providing radios to families of children with disabilities in a number of countries, and supporting ministries of education to make sure radio lessons are inclusive and accessible (Humanity & Inclusion). While humanitarian agencies have been providing home visits to almost 700 children with disabilities that are enrolled in school in Azraq and Za'atari refugee camps in Jordan (UNICEF and Mercy Corps). Assistive technologies and basic education support for these communities of learners need to be strengthened in post COVID-19 education systems.
	Non-state actors should continue to support capacity building on administering learning assessments and analyzing data for decision-making, with a focus on disaggregated data for marginalized children. Their support could be encouraged assisting with tracing children at risk of not returning to school and linking those findings with appropriate support.
	Academic research across education, health and social sectors is critical to clarify the interlinkages between school openings and the pandemic.
	Well regulated partnerships between ministries of education and telecommunications regulators and providers can provide internet connectivity solutions for marginalized children. In Paraguay, an agreement between the Ministry of Education and one of the biggest tech companies in the country has resulted in an educational package at zero cost that will benefit 60,000 teachers and 1.2 million students (World Bank, 2020).
Apply universal design: Ensure inclusive systems fulfil every learner's potential	No current learning solution for school-closures provides learning continuity for all. Equitable blended learning approaches are of critical importance in the face of likely recurrent school closures over the coming months, including addressing the digital divide for girls and poorest.
	A range of solutions are required to address barriers to learning for the most marginalized including children with

	disabilities, refugees and the poorest. Digital content should be made more accessible, paired with tools and resources for learners with disabilities and their parents, such as audio narration, sign language video, and simplified text. Innovative uses of technology should be explored. As this content is designed, it should include formative assessments, rapid response surveys, and feedback from users to understand how to improve and integrate principles of universal design for learning.
	Using social media, including WhatsApp and other messaging services, can help engage with communities and learners, ensuring that they have the support they need to engage with the learning content being provided. Radio and television are low-tech alternatives to deliver remote learning during COVID-19. Broadcast services are increasingly being used by governments to reach rural areas and households that lack internet access.
	As schools re-open, immediate remedial education programmes are required. Effective remediation efforts immediately upon students' return to school could reduce long-term learning loss for students by half (Kaffenberger, 2020). Socio-emotional learning should be incorporated into the curriculum to help children.
	Assessments should be formative not punitive. Simple one-on-one formative assessments of every student should be used on a continual basis rather than only at the start and end of learning periods, which could track student progress, and help make immediate decisions on child progress and program design.
Prepare, empower and motivate the education workforce: All teachers should be prepared to teach all students	Governments should make space for dialogue with the education workforce and their representatives, pro-actively engaging them in formal decision-making and drawing on their expertise and insights.
	The pandemic has highlighted just how critical it is for all teachers to be trained in inclusion, which should be part of their ongoing teacher education as a matter of course, rather than being taught as a specialist subject. Currently four out of ten countries do not provide teacher training on inclusion. (Source: PEER website)
	Among low- and middle-income countries, 17% are planning to recruit more teachers, 22% to increase class time and 68% to introduce remedial classes when schools reopen. Faced with this task, teachers need training to plan and implement effective remedial education programmes to help the most disadvantaged students make up for learning losses and re-engage with education. They also need more training to respond to potential psychosocial needs arising in the aftermath of the pandemics, and to improve their digital skills to manage online learning: Even in OECD countries, only 60 %

	of teachers reported being taught to use ICT for teaching in recent continuing professional development activities.
Collect data on and for inclusion with attention and respect: Avoid labelling that stigmatizes	Since 2015, 41% of countries, representing 13% of the global population, have not had a publicly available household survey to provide disaggregated data on key education indicators. Education ministries must collaborate with other ministries and statistical agencies to collect population-level data coherently so as to understand the scale of disadvantage for the marginalized (GEM Report, 2020).

Tracking losses in learning equity and inclusion will be essential for countries to assess the full extent of school closures on all learners. At a minimum, all education systems should collect and report data on education delivery disaggregated by individual student characteristics, such as gender, poverty and disability; teacher participation should also be disaggregated by individual teacher characteristics, such as gender and contract status.

At the global level, countries should support efforts by UN agencies and international organisations to carry out global surveys on national responses to COVID-19. |
| **Learn from peers: A shift to inclusion is not easy** | This is a turning point to learn from new pedagogies and hybrid approaches being used by different countries to tackle the learning crisis and provide more inclusive and creative learning models.

Solidarity across countries, regions, and sectors has become a defining symbol in the education movement during the pandemic.

The Global Education Coalition launched by UNESCO facilitates inclusive learning opportunities for children and youth during the pandemic. Its objective was to mobilize actors and resources to develop effective and unified response, to coordinate action to maximize impact and avoid overlap by matching on-the-ground needs with local and global solutions and provide distance learning education leveraging high-tech, low-tech and no-tech approaches. It has shared a list of distance learning solutions with the aim of helping parents, teachers, schools and school administrators to ensure learning continuity during the pandemic (UNESCO, 2020).

UNESCO, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and the World Bank issued new guidelines on the safe reopening of school, which offer practical advice for national and local authorities on how to keep children safe when they return to school (UNESCO et al. 2020). At the regional level, guidance notes for Ministries of Education were also published.

Sufficient resources now need to be allocated for ongoing maintenance of these new global public goods, to capture best practice approaches and ongoing country innovations to education delivery post- Covid-19. |

This advocacy brief and the 2020 GEM Report recommendations have been endorsed eight organizations that champion inclusion
Download the Report: bit.ly/2020gemreport #AllmeansALL