



LEARNING IN A COVID-19 WORLD: THE UNIQUE RISKS OF FALLING BEHIND FOR CHILDREN IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

Roughly 1 billion children worldwide are out of school due to school closures related to COVID-19. Children in humanitarian settings face a double crisis as the health emergency disrupts their opportunities to learn, develop and thrive. Ensuring children can continue to learn during the pandemic, no matter their access to technology, must be central to the COVID-19 response in fragile contexts.

SUMMARY: KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- As schools in fragile states remain closed due to COVID-19, **children are at high risk of dropping out of school altogether**. Half of refugee girls may not return to school.
- Education is always underfunded in humanitarian crises, and despite the damage of COVID-19 on education globally, this has not changed. **The Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 calls for a mere 4% of the \$10.26 billion appeal to go to education**. As of August, only \$277 million of the \$403 million requested was provided for education programs.
- COVID-19 mitigation measures, such as lockdowns and school closures, introduce new and compound existing obstacles to delivering education in humanitarian settings. **The digital divide means children in fragile and conflict-affected places will be disproportionately affected by school closures, as they cannot easily transition from the classroom to online learning**. Gaps in learning outcomes are set to widen.
- Best practices for continuing education in no-, low-, and high-technology environments exist, but funding and political will are needed to implement them. **IRC is employing innovative solutions to reach children in unique circumstances**. In **Tanzania**, IRC has adapted materials for at-home learning, including play-based activities. In **Colombia**, a new audio platform will help teachers provide engaging audio content to students in their homes. In **Bangladesh**, IRC piloted tablet-based learning among Rohingya children without Internet access. In **Jordan**, Ahlan Simsim—context-specific early childhood programming—combines IRC direct services, via WhatsApp and phone calls, with Sesame Street mass media available on YouTube.
- Urgent action is needed:
 - > **Host governments must include refugees and other displaced populations in national education plans for remote learning and reopening schools.**
 - > **Donors must fully fund the GHRP appeal for education and provide multiyear, flexible financing** to support continued education for refugees and hosts.
 - > **UN agencies and NGOs should conduct robust rapid digital capacity assessments that include refugees; tailor solutions to different remote learning environments; and adapt and distribute content** to meet needs of children, parents and caregivers and teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Every parent shares a common dream: for their children to be safe, healthy, happy, and able to learn and grow to their fullest potential. But that dream has been threatened in 2020. Roughly 1 billion students worldwide out of school because of COVID-19 related school closures. This disruption to education will have dire implications for children's current and future health, wellbeing, and economic opportunities--especially the most vulnerable children living in crisis contexts.

The scope of this global crisis is unprecedented, but the education dimension is not new. Before the pandemic, 250 million school-aged children and youth worldwide were out of school. These young people were overwhelmingly concentrated in fragile, conflict-affected contexts. Indeed, refugee children were five times more likely to be out of school than their peers. Many more who were in school were not accessing quality education necessary to gain skills for success in school and beyond. These children are facing a double emergency.

The learning gap will only widen as COVID-19 drives school closures where remote alternatives are limited or do not exist at scale. Already, 86% of children in developing countries at the primary school level no longer have access to education, compared to 20% in developed countries. As schools in fragile states remain closed, and as the economic fallout of COVID-19 takes its toll on families, children risk dropping out of school altogether. The consequences are even more acute for girls, who face additional risks of exploitation, early marriage and child labor. Estimates suggest more than half of all refugee girls will not return when schools open.

The potential cost of COVID-19 related school closures is astounding. Young people stand to lose an estimated \$10 trillion in labor earnings over the course of their working lives, a figure equivalent to one-tenth of global GDP vanishing. Hard-won gains towards the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 4: Quality Education, are now on track to be reversed, threatening economic development and stability.

Ensuring children can continue to access quality education during the pandemic and that programs are in place later on to support children who have fallen behind must be central to the COVID-19 response in humanitarian contexts. However, humanitarian actors must overcome a number of challenges in the short- and longer-term to keep children learning.

THE CHALLENGES:

DELIVERING EDUCATION IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS DURING A PANDEMIC

Delivering quality education in humanitarian contexts already presents a number of challenges: lack of school infrastructure and trained teachers; schools located too far to reach safely; overcrowded classrooms; and policy barriers that prevent refugees from accessing accredited programs. A lack of multiyear funding, coordination, and political will necessary to help children learn, grow, and thrive in crisis contexts underpins all these immediate challenges. In addition, children in crisis and conflict settings may suffer from trauma which negatively impacts their learning ability. These obstacles will persist throughout and beyond COVID-19, during school closures and reopening.

National COVID-19 mitigation measures, such as lockdowns and school closures, create new and compound existing challenges in humanitarian settings. They also increase the number of children who will require academic, social-emotional and psychosocial support. Meanwhile, parents and caregivers in crisis contexts may not immediately have the tools to support their children's well-being and learning at home.

COVID-19 will disproportionately affect those without access to digital technology as they cannot transition from the classroom to online learning. Recent analysis found less than one-quarter of low-income countries are providing any form of remote instruction. Moreover, remote learning options available to children in wealthier countries—or in wealthier parts of some countries—are impossible in humanitarian settings given limited Internet access. In the least developed countries, only two in ten households have access to the Internet. An IRC assessment found that in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, only 52% of households surveyed have access to power; of these, only 22% have power for more than four hours a day, and 63% have three to four hours per day.

A one-size-fits-all approach to education during school closures and reopening will not serve children in crisis contexts and relying on technology will not be a panacea for the education crisis furthered by COVID-19. Nevertheless, the international community has not yet stepped up with adequate resources to implement and test creative solutions to reach the hardest-to-reach children. Education is consistently one of the least funded sectors in humanitarian responses; it receives less than 3% of humanitarian aid annually and prior to COVID-19 faced an \$8.5 billion annual deficit. Similarly, the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 calls for \$403 million for education support—just 4% of the \$10.26 billion appeal. As of mid-August, donors had provided only \$277 million for education programs. Not only are programs underfunded, but so is the research that can determine which programs work best, for whom, under what condition, and at what cost.

ADAPTING APPROACHES, CONTINUING QUALITY EDUCATION

For decades, IRC has helped provide education to children and youth in the most challenging contexts globally. This work has been guided by an understanding of effective strategies to build and maintain education programs in communities where children have faced prolonged disruptions to their education, or never had access to quality education to begin with, and where children have experienced significant trauma due to crises. The following adaptations to our programs reflect best practices in responding to emergencies that have caused school closures.

Distributing educational content

Lockdown policies impede the distribution of materials and educational content to households. Where digital platforms are accessible, distribution may be possible via WhatsApp, YouTube and other tools. In areas where digital platforms are unavailable, governments and humanitarian responders can coordinate across sectors to identify ways to integrate the distribution of content with the distribution of basic needs (e.g. cash, food). For example, IRC has worked with its Afghan partners to adapt and deliver self-learning materials through existing distribution systems to 3,423 school-aged children, along with caregiver guidance, in the Badghis Province of Afghanistan. These cross-sectoral distribution mechanisms can also provide families with print materials that accompany digital or audio content, data bundles or phone credits, and other items, like paper and pencils.

Supporting parents, caregivers and teachers

During times of disruption and crisis, strengthening children’s social-emotional skills is paramount to helping them persevere, manage emotions, and learn. Parents and caregivers—children’s first teachers—have an important role to play in supporting their children’s social-emotional learning at home while schools remain closed. Guidance can be provided to caregivers through SMS, where mobile technology is available, and through printed materials that accompany educational content. Suggestions for families might include tips for establishing daily routines that provide a sense of predictability, and help children identify and manage their emotions. In addition, governments and humanitarian actors can provide cash assistance to families that cannot afford to buy necessary school supplies for their children’s at-home learning.

Teachers pivoting to at-home learning may need support in adapting content and reaching their students effectively through remote means. As many teachers in humanitarian settings are still improving their teaching skills, professional development should continue. One way to accomplish this is through routine phone check-ins; in Afghanistan, IRC has been able to continue supporting nearly 100 teachers' professional development through routine phone check-ins during the pandemic.

Adapting education programming for different remote learning environments

Program adaptations for at-home learning will depend availability and accessibility of digital versus in-person programs. There should be different solutions for environments with no-technology, low-technology (e.g. radio) and high-technology (e.g. television, internet) availability. Before designing a program, area-based rapid digital capacity assessment should be conducted to determine household access to power sources, radio, television and the internet. These assessments should include both national and displaced populations; new surveys may be needed to account for the needs of marginalized groups that are typically left out of national household surveys.

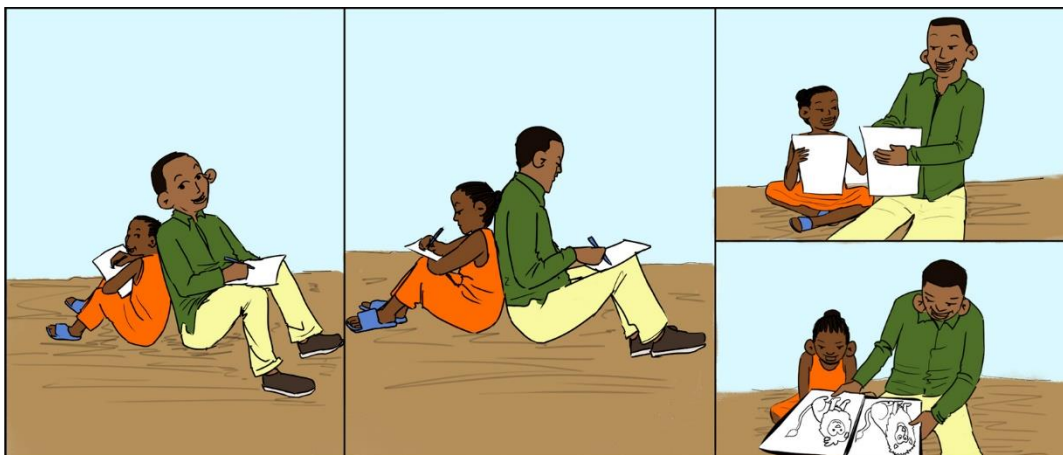
No-technology solutions

Over 30% of previously enrolled schoolchildren worldwide cannot be reached by digital and broadcast remote learning programs. In these contexts, students will rely even more heavily on parents and family members' support for children's use of written materials, such as lesson or activity booklets, and on play-based learning activities to learn. For younger children, a parent or caregiver will need to conduct lessons; for older children, some materials can be self-instructional.

TANZANIA: CONTINUING EDUCATION & LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

In March, Tanzania closed all schools for Tanzanians and Burundi and Congolese refugees in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although schools reopened in late June, many students have not yet returned and nearly 2 million children between ages of 7 and 13 were already out-of-school before the pandemic.

IRC has adapted by converting classroom-based lesson plans into worksheets and at-home activities with a focus on continuing the development of literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills. Parents and caregivers with minimal free time and limited literacy skills can easily implement these lessons. IRC is taking advantage of cross-sectoral distribution mechanisms by bundling them with food and medicines for distribution to 78,000 children ages 6 to 14 in an estimated 37,624 homes. In addition, through the PlayMatters program, refugee and host community children, caregivers and teachers in Tanzania, Uganda and Ethiopia have access to a "Play Library" of materials, which includes images like the below to support learning through play.



Low-technology solutions

Radio remains the primary means of distributing information around the world, accessible to roughly 75% of households in developing countries. Radio programming is a low cost yet powerful tool that can reach the most vulnerable communities such as out-of-school children. Educational radio programs can be implemented via structured lessons, short messages and communal reading.

Home-based listening circles, reading response activities, facilitated discussion, parent-child groups, buddy reading, and psychosocial activities should accompany interactive broadcasts. Given the potential spread of COVID-19, these activities should be conducted among family members or in small groups where social distancing is possible.

IRC is embarking on an audio strategy in contexts where education is disrupted that capitalizes on a vast range of localized content—mindfulness clips, storytelling, math games and more—and can be adapted and distributed via radio, as well as through other technologies that do not require internet, such as tablets.

COLOMBIA: BROADCASTING ON THE RADIO

Before the pandemic, the Colombian government had opened its public schools to Venezuelan refugee children. However, transportation school material costs still impeded access. Of 460,000 school-aged Venezuelan children, over 198,000 were enrolled in the education system while 260,000 remained out of school. With COVID-19 related school closures, even more kids—a combined 11.3 million Venezuelan and Colombian children—are out of school and need support to keep their education on track.

IRC is designing a new platform, Audioclass, to help teachers provide audio content to students in their homes. Audioclass delivers educational content via radios, smart phones, mobile phones and tablets. It provides teachers with a content bank to develop lesson plans and includes ways to track students' progress. IRC plans to provide two weeks of audio-based educational content to forty refugee students and four of their teachers. IRC will also train the teachers to use the system. IRC plans to improve Audioclass based on participant feedback and eventually scale it up.

COX'S BAZAR, BANGLADESH: TABLET-BASED LEARNING

Following COVID-19 school closures, an estimated 325,000 school-aged Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar lost access to their learning spaces. Even prior to COVID-19, a number of challenges in the education sector persisted: limited space, mixed learning levels, difficulty recruiting qualified teachers, and complex language issues. Government policies that prohibited Rohingya children's access to formal education compounded these issues. Although the government has made some progress, such as allowing implementation of an informal Guidelines on Information Education Program and approving use of the formal Myanmar curriculum for some grades, COVID-19 put these efforts on hold. The government has also prohibited Rohingya from accessing mobile data and the Internet, effectively restricting access to online learning.

Despite these barriers, IRC piloted an innovative approach that could be used while Cox's Bazar remains in lockdown: a localized, high-quality, interactive and guided curriculum that students can access on a tablet and that allows them to take charge of their own learning without relying on a physical classroom, the Internet, or a formal teacher. IRC's pilot of 632 refugee students found improvements in reading (from 71.6% who could not read at baseline to 47% after four months) and math (from 81.7% who could not identify double-digit numbers to 51.5%). The approach also empowered low-skilled caregivers and community members to supervise learning. One important hurdle IRC will need to overcome to scale this program is Rohingya's access to power sources; according to an IRC assessment, more than half of Rohingya families surveyed had no access to power, and among those who did, fewer than one in four had power for more than four hours a day.

High-technology solutions

Conflict and displacement crises are overwhelmingly located in developing countries, where access to technology – a television, a computer, the internet – is often limited. However, a number of countries facing humanitarian crises do have access to digital technology and can use it to support remote learning. Decisions about which platforms to use (e.g. television, computer, etc.) should be based on pilots and testing that account for the level of digital literacy among the most vulnerable groups.

JORDAN: ONLINE AND MOBILE LEARNING

Although the Jordanian government has allowed Syrian school-aged children to enroll in the public education system, just 145,000 (66%) of the 232,500 Syrian school-aged children living in Jordan were enrolled in public schools prior to the pandemic. In March, the Jordanian government closed all public schools to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and shifted to digital, distanced learning.

Before COVID-19 hit, IRC introduced at-home education programming for refugee families to complement in-school learning. At the heart of this effort was Ahlan Simsim, a program in partnership with Sesame Workshop that brings quality programming to refugees and host communities via YouTube. The programming targets children ages three to eight and focuses on social-emotional development. Ahlan Simsim includes digital and broadcast content and a program of home visits by trained facilitators to support children and their caregivers.

Ahlan Simsim's digital education programming has reached more than 1,600 Syrian refugee children living in Jordan. More broadly, Ahlan Simsim has conducted virtual trainings to prepare more than 300 program facilitators across the Syria response region for necessary adaptations due to the pandemic. This adapted programming, which has included shifting home visits to a remote format via phone calls or mobile phones (WhatsApp or SMS), has reached about 12,000 children and caregivers across the region. In collaboration with Community Health Volunteers, IRC has combined the Ahlan Simsim remote home visits with primary healthcare visits, reaching 6,550 children.

86% of refugees in Jordan own a mobile phone and 10% have access to a shared phone. However, the digital access gap remains a challenge in Jordan: one-sixth of children in Jordan do not have internet at home and one-third do not have a computer. Syrian refugee children are likely overrepresented in these households.



A Syrian mother and two of her children in Azraq refugee camp in Jordan. She says Ahlan Simsim has helped her children become more confident. Ahmad Al-Jarery/IRC

RECOMMENDATIONS

Urgent action is needed to avoid significant backsliding in education outcomes for children caught in the double crisis caused by ongoing humanitarian crises and the COVID-19 pandemic.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS SHOULD:

- > **Include refugees and other displaced populations in national strategies for remote learning**, including equitable access to technology and remedial programs, while schools remain closed due to COVID-19.
- > **Include refugees and other displaced populations in national strategies for reopening schools** to ensure enrollment, attendance and retention, including catch-up classes and social-emotional support.

DONORS SHOULD:

- > **Fully fund the GHRP appeal for the education sector** (\$403 million) and re-evaluate needs for the next GHRP in January 2021 to ensure the appeal matches needs.
- > **Provide multiyear, flexible financing** to implementing partners to design, implement, and evaluate education programs for refugees and host communities, supporting remote opportunities and in-person programs when schools reopen.
- > **Fund evaluation, implementation and cost research** on the most effective and efficient ways to deliver quality education and achieve academic and social emotional learning outcomes for children whose education is impacted by COVID-19.
- > **Direct funding to support teachers' professional development** to adapt to remote strategies.

HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT ACTORS, INCLUDING UN AGENCIES AND NGOS, SHOULD:

- > **Conduct robust rapid digital capacity assessments** that include refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and other marginalized groups.
- > **Implement context-specific solutions for remote learning** based on best practices for no-, low- and high-technology environments.
- > **Adapt content and distribution of materials** to address needs of the entire education system, including those of children, caregivers, and teachers

For more information about the International Rescue Committee, visit [Rescue.org](https://www.rescue.org).