

Media Update

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UNICEF-UNESCO

PRESS RELEASE

The future of 800 million children across Asia at risk as their education has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

At least 27 million students in the region were not able to attend any in-school education since the beginning of the pandemic.

BANGKOK/KATHMANDU, 19 October 2021 — The education of more than 800 million children – 400 million in South Asia, 260 million in East Asia and 140 million in Southeast Asia – across Asia has been disrupted due to school closures since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, and of that number, more than 27 million children have been waiting for more than a year to return to their classrooms, according to the report, ‘Situation Analysis on the Effects and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in Asia’ (hereafter ‘Report’ or ‘SitAn Report’), released today by UNICEF and UNESCO.

The Report highlights the continued impact of the pandemic on children’s education and features various regional government’s programmes and initiatives to respond to it. At a time of the year when children traditionally should have returned to school from annual holidays, the report urges governments to reopen schools as soon as it is safe to do so.

Responding to the advent and spread of the pandemic in 2020, schools in Asia were fully closed on average for 50 per cent of teaching days. In some countries, for example the Philippines schools have been closed throughout the entire pandemic to date, leaving an estimated 27 million students in pre-primary to secondary education without any in-person learning, a continuous period running from early 2020 to the present for over a year and counting. In Bangladesh, schools have been closed throughout the entire pandemic until 12 September, when they reopened again.

Even now, as the world enters the last quarter of 2021, many children are facing an unprecedented second year of school closures as new variants of the coronavirus spread across the region. The associated consequences of such continuous school closures are staggering and include learning loss; mental distress; missed school meals and routine vaccinations; heightened risk of drop out of structured education; increased, child labour; and increased child marriage. Many of these dire consequences are already affecting countless children, and many will continue to be felt in the years to come.

“We cannot overlook the impact that the disruption of education services has had on children, particularly the most vulnerable. When schools remain closed, children miss out on the biggest opportunity to learn and develop to their full potential. The future of an entire generation is at stake; therefore, we need every effort to ensure a safe reopening of schools as soon as possible. Otherwise, the learning loss will be difficult to overcome,” stated Marcoluigi Corsi, UNICEF Regional Director a.i. for East Asia and Pacific.

While countries across Asia are taking actions to provide students with distance learning, at least 28 per cent, or 220 million pre-primary to upper secondary students in the region, are not being reached. In addition to the lack of material assets and support to access technology, other significant obstacles that prevent disadvantaged children, and many girls, from accessing distance learning during these difficult times include a generally poor learning environment, an increase in pressure to take up domestic household chores and being forced to work outside the home.

This is why the report underscores the importance of delivering equitable and inclusive distance learning at scale to reach all children during full or partial school closures, while providing a package of support to ensure children’s health, nutrition and wellbeing. It also calls on governments and partners to strengthen teaching and teacher support, so as to address current low levels of learning and help narrow the learning divide, and protect and preserve education funding.

Unless mitigation measures are swiftly implemented, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates an economic loss of USD \$1.25 trillion for Asia, which is equivalent to 5.4 per cent of the region’s 2020 gross domestic product (GDP). Existing evidence shows that the cost of addressing learning gaps are lower and more effective when they are tackled early on in a crisis, and that ongoing investments made in education will support economic recovery, growth and prosperity.

“Governments, partners and the private sector will need to work together, not only to get the strategies and levels of investment right, but to build more resilient, effective and inclusive systems that are able to deliver on the promise of education as a fundamental human right for all children, whether schools are open or closed,” said George Laryea-Adjei, UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia.

Estimates indicate that 7 million schoolchildren in Asia are at risk of dropping out of school due to the pandemic – reversing progress made in school enrolment in recent decades. According to the Report, education budgets in the region will need to increase by an average of 10 per cent to catch up with such losses if Asia is to reach the education targets of the UN 2030 Agenda’s Sustainable Development Goals in the next nine years.

“While major efforts are needed to mitigate the learning loss of those children who return to school in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase, we must also remember that 128 million children in Asia were already out of school at the onset of the pandemic; this figure represents roughly half of all out-of-school children globally. This is a learning crisis which needs to be addressed,” said Shigeru Aoyagi, Director of UNESCO Bangkok.

Since the start of the pandemic, UNICEF and UNESCO have supported national governments to maintain and improve interventions to ensure continuity of children’s learning and to safely reopen and operate schools.

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