

## Press Release

### UNESCO warns that the funding gap to achieve SDG4 in poorer countries risks increasing to US\$ 200 billion annually due to COVID-19 if we do not take urgent action

*As finance ministers gather at the UN on 8 September to discuss Financing for Development in the era of COVID-19, leaders must prioritise investment in education for low- and lower-middle-income countries.*

Paris, 4 September – New research from UNESCO’s Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report shows that school closures due to COVID-19 are projected to increase the annual funding gap for education in poorer countries to as much as US\$200 billion per year. However, investing now in re-enrolment and remediation programmes could reduce the additional funding gap by 75%.

[UNESCO’s new estimates](#) first show the striking increase in the annual funding gap to meet the Sustainable Development Goal 4 to ensure inclusive and quality education for all by 2030 in low and lower-middle-income countries. With new annual spending requirements at US\$504 billion, the funding gap has increased from US\$ 39 billion annually projected in 2015, to US\$148 billion annually projected in 2020. The now shorter span of reaching SDG4, slow progress before 2020, and improvements in data and quality standards are among the reasons for the increase.

The COVID-19 pandemic further aggravates education financing gaps. Under plausible school closure and GDP growth scenarios, COVID-19 adds up to one-third to the annual funding gap of US\$148 billion to reach as much as US\$ 200 billion.

“With less than a decade to go before the SDG deadline, the world is facing an education funding crisis that will be further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic” declared UNESCO Director-General, Audrey Azoulay. “Entire generations are at risk, disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable. While education is clearly a victim of the pandemic, it is also the solution to the longer-term recovery. I call on all actors to spare no effort in prioritizing investment in education as a global public good.”

School closures have led to loss of learning for millions of students. Distance teaching solutions are simply not an option for at least 580 million students in low and middle-income countries according to a UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank survey.

Driving higher costs for countries since COVID-19 are the need to re-enrol students and to offer remediation programmes to help get the most marginalised back to school, support them to catch up and maximise their chances of staying in school. Additional costs are needed to ensure children are safe when they return to classes, with access to hygiene facilities and extra classrooms to enable physical distancing. These programmes and actions will add US\$5 to US\$35 billion to the financing need. They are however far cheaper than having to roll out second chance programmes later down the line. Acting now rather than later could reduce the potential cost of COVID-19 on education by 75%.

“The pandemic is having devastating consequences for children from the poorest countries. We must not allow education systems to collapse – and with them, the future prospects and potential of

learners from disadvantaged backgrounds”, says Malala Yousafzai from the Malala Fund. “We need to see this as an opportunity to build more resilient education systems that will enable the most vulnerable children to return to school and catch up on their lost learning”, she added.

UNESCO has warned that total aid to education is likely to decline by 12% by 2022 as a result of the economic consequences of COVID-19. This is a threat to the recovery of education from the disruption of the pandemic.

**Reducing the impact of COVID-19 on children’s education requires the following actions:**

- Governments in low and lower-middle income countries must resist pressure to cut their budget for education because of the difficult fiscal environment. Investment for schools and learners must be maintained if not increased. Governments must also direct a significant part of their education budget to the most marginalised regions and schools;
- Similarly, international donors must protect their share of international development aid towards global education, and, additionally use equitable funding to ensure that support is directed towards countries and regions with chronic inequalities. Only 47% of aid to basic and secondary education goes to low and lower middle-income countries, where it’s needed the most;
- This health crisis has exacerbated the effect of intersecting inequalities on education opportunities. Countries will need additional funding for COVID-19 responses that were previously not programmed. Donors must ensure flexibility so that existing programmes can be restructured and realigned to help countries ensure that COVID-19 is only a temporary setback;
- Ministries of education and social protection need to work together and target their policies towards the most disadvantaged. 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. Policies like these, will make sure less children drop out of school.

Manos Antoninis, Director of the GEM Report added: “The uncertainty about when schools will reopen means reduced participation and prolonged learning loss, particularly for the most marginalised children. We know from previous research that poorer learners are least likely to catch up, which will affect their future ability to earn a living. Long term planning for recovery from this pandemic must include increasing financing for education now in the form of remediation programmes, rather than waiting and facing bills for catch-up classes many will not be able to join or afford.”

Filling a finance gap that risks rising to \$200 billion per year due to COVID-19 requires systemic change- and is only possible if leaders respond to this global education emergency.

The international community needs to urgently mobilise additional funding for education if there is any hope of achieving the SDG 4 goals, pushed further into reverse by the pandemic.

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## Notes to editors

For more information on how much individual countries are spending on education please visit UNESCO GEM website SCOPE: <https://www.education-progress.org/en/articles/finance/>

Download the full paper on the finance gap: Bit.ly/COVIDcostSDG4 (Include link to Social Media Pack -- <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/COVIDcostSDG4-social-media> -- and to #SaveOurFuture campaign)

Download the latest research on international aid for education and COVID-19: Bit.ly/*2020aidtoeducation*