COVID-19 Learning Losses
Rebuilding Quality Learning for All in the Middle East and North Africa

Executive Summary
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This report was jointly prepared by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank (WB). The report was prepared under the overall guidance of Hana Yoshimoto (UNESCO, Chief of Education Section), Jeannette Vogelaar and Brenda Haiplik (UNICEF Regional Advisors) and Andreas Blom (WB, Practice Manager). The team who prepared the report was co-led by a multi-disciplinary team with the following representatives:

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## Acronyms and Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COVID-19</td>
<td>Coronavirus disease, first identified in 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAC</td>
<td>Conflict Affected Countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>DHS</td>
<td>Demographic and Health Surveys</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECD</td>
<td>Early Childhood Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECE</td>
<td>Early Childhood Education</td>
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<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<td>LAYS</td>
<td>Learning Adjusted Years of Schooling</td>
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<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communications Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>IIEP-UNESCO</td>
<td>International Institute for Educational Planning of UNESCO</td>
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<tr>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>Middle East and North Africa</td>
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<td>MENARO</td>
<td>UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office</td>
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<td>MICS</td>
<td>Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys</td>
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<td>MoE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goals</td>
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<td>PISA</td>
<td>Programme for International Student Assessment</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
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<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</td>
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<td>UNRWA</td>
<td>United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees</td>
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<td>UIS</td>
<td>UNESCO Institute for Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>WASH</td>
<td>Water, Sanitation and Hygiene</td>
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<td>WB</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
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<td>WFP</td>
<td>World Food Programme</td>
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The broader economic impacts of the pandemic have been exacerbating the pre-existing macroeconomic and fiscal imbalances of MENA countries, placing public budgets under further pressure and causing a negative impact on investment in education systems. The overall functioning of education systems has been affected, including capacity to collect evidence to inform decisions and policy-making. This means that while facing unprecedented difficulties, policymakers and educators have less information available to help understand these challenges and develop evidence-based solutions.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, efforts have been made to monitor both school closures (and re-opening) and the measures put in place to ensure continuity of learning. These include the Survey of Ministries of Education on National Responses to COVID-19, jointly supported by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank. However, to date, no systematic evidence has been available on how students’ learning is being affected by the disruptions caused by the pandemic or on the impact of education response measures initiated by governments.

This report contributes to filling this evidence gap and includes a series of simulations of potential learning losses due to COVID-19 and exploration of their longer-term implications. The analysis is based on the Enabling learning for all framework, which outlines access, engagement and enabling environment as the three crucial enablers for learning, while the simulation assumptions are informed by the evidence on school closures and governments’ education-related responses, collected through the joint survey.

1. 20 MENA countries/territories (according to the UNICEF and the World Bank categorisation) include: Algeria, Djibouti, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Gulf area (Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE), Oman, Yemen, Iran.
6. Authors developed the framework based on desk and literature review.
COVID-19 Learning Losses: Rebuilding Quality Learning for All in the Middle East and North Africa

This report:  
1 Summarises the information on school closures in MENA and the educational response to COVID-19 to date;  
2 Estimates the potential learning loss associated with the pandemic, based on simulations; and,  
3 Presents a series of recommendations for policy and programming to recover learning loss and ‘build back better’, with the aim that quality education becomes the experience of all MENA’s learners.

Responses to date: enabling learning for all

The pandemic has affected the enabling of learning for all, including access to learning, engaged learners and an enabling environment.

Access to learning

Efforts to ensure access to learning have varied - from country to country and by grade - and have included face-to-face learning for earlier grades, hybrid learning for most grades and full remote learning. Remote learning modalities have included digital learning platforms, television and radio broadcasts and distribution of paper-based materials.

Despite these efforts, regional-level evidence shows that approximately 40 per cent of students in MENA (37 million children and adolescents) have not benefitted from any remote learning initiative, the majority of whom were already vulnerable and disadvantaged. The main reasons for exclusion were the lack of availability of remote learning initiatives (available only for specific grades, in some countries) and the lack of tools to access remote learning (particularly digital devices and internet connections).

Engaged learners

Findings suggest that at least 43 per cent of MENA countries recognise the crucial role of parents and caregivers in enabling learners’ engagement, having provided materials to support them with home-based learning for primary and secondary students. Thirty-eight per cent of countries reported providing regular follow-up phone calls from teachers to parents and 19 per cent provided guidance materials for home-based pre-primary education.

Enabling environment

The pandemic also highlighted the need for continuous professional development, psychological support and socio-emotional learning for teachers, to enable them to make the transition to effective online and/or hybrid teaching. In response, according to the joint survey, 33 per cent of countries in the MENA region provided teachers with instructions on online teaching and learning, as well as content designed or adapted for remote learning.

Officials reported that online platforms and televised learning were seen as the most effective modes of delivery, but official assessments have yet to be conducted about remote learning measures and their impact on learning and engagement.

What’s at stake: impact of COVID-19 on future schooling, learning and earning

The analysis in this report focuses on four key outcomes of the simulation model:

→ learning poverty,
→ learning-adjusted years of schooling (LAYS),
→ percentage below minimum proficiency on Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and
→ lifetime earnings. The simulations suggest that COVID-19-related school closures are likely to create a substantial setback to the global goal of halving the percentage of learning poor by 2030, as indicated by the following results:

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8 Ibid.
9 UNICEF (2020). COVID-19 – Are Children able to continue Learning during School Closure?  
11 International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2021). Futures of Teaching – Conversation between teachers and experts from the Arab States.  
12 MENA: Upper Middle Income countries include: Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Libya. MENA: Lower Middle Income countries include: Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Palestinian territories (based on World Bank income groupings).  
14 PISA is the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures 15-year-olds’ ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges.
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1 The number of children unable to read and understand a simple age-appropriate text (learning poor) in the MENA region could increase by 9.4 percentage points (from 59.9 per cent to 69.3 per cent), including increased inequality among the learning poor across the region;

2 Children in the MENA region could lose one LAYS;

3 The proportion of 15-year-old students performing below minimum proficiency in PISA could increase from 60.1 per cent to 71.6 per cent; and,

4 MENA economies could lose up to US$0.8 trillion in lifetime earnings for the current cohort of learners as a result of their lower levels of learning, their lost months of school, or their potential for dropping out of school.

‘Building back better’: reimagining and enabling quality learning for all

Lessons learned

Based on the analysis of data and information on school closures, the responses put in place by governments to enable learning continuity, and the simulations of the potential impact of COVID-19 on learning and earning, the report outlines the following takeaways and lessons learned on the three pillars of the “enabling learning for all” framework.

In summary, the simulations suggest that unless countries act quickly on several areas, COVID-19-related school closures could set back the learning and future prospects of MENA’s current school-aged learners in a number of significant ways. With data and evidence, policy makers have a range of tools at their disposal which can be deployed to help them prioritize and accelerate learning.

Access to learning

→ Strengthening a range of learning modalities is urgently needed to ensure that all learners have access to both learning and services to support their wellbeing.

→ Pre-existing learning disparities are growing, suggesting a strong need for differentiated interventions and targeted policies, resources for those at a disadvantage, and innovative techniques including teaching based on the learning level of a child.

Engaged learners

→ Teachers and parents need support to cope with the challenges created by the disruption of face-to-face learning and the shift towards digital and other modes of remote learning.

→ Many MENA countries could experience a learning catastrophe if urgent action is not taken to provide remedial, remote and social-emotional learning for all learners.

→ Learner, teacher and parent/caregiver perspectives on effectiveness are needed.

Enabling environment

→ Comprehensive data are required to plan and monitor responses and develop mitigation and recovery strategies for learning.

→ Education systems need to become more equitable, adaptive and resilient to enable access to learning at all times for all of MENA’s learners.

→ The learning and earning trajectories of a generation are at stake, including learning-adjusted years of schooling, learning proficiency and lifetime earnings.

15 Learning poverty is defined as the inability to read and understand a simple text by age 10. This indicator depicts the share of primary-aged children who are not in school (schooling deprived) or are below the minimum proficiency level in reading (learning deprived).
Recommendations

The takeaways and lessons above imply the urgent need to work towards children’s safe return to school and, until this is possible, ensure that all children have equitable access to remote learning. A concerted effort is also needed to accelerate learning and tackle the learning crisis that predated COVID-19, by providing opportunities for remedial learning and catch-up for all children. Recovering lost learning in MENA will require reimagining education systems in several important ways:

1 **During the pandemic and early recovery**
   - It is important to address inequalities in access and engagement, as school closures can disproportionately impact marginalised and vulnerable groups, potentially deepening inequality. It is also critical to provide access for the early years and make remote instruction more effective through stronger support and guidance for teachers, engagement of parents and caregivers, and through more learner-centered pedagogical practices.

2 **As children return to in-person schooling**
   - It is critical to ensure safe school reopening, assess potential learning losses and support teachers to ensure that teaching is adapted to the learning levels of the students to support catch up and recover lost learning.

3 **Policy-makers and educators** must reflect on and address the lessons emerging from the provision of remote and hybrid instruction over the past two years. Education systems will need to strengthen their infrastructure (including technology) to become more adaptive and resilient, in order to ensure effective learning on a sustainable basis for all children across the MENA region.

This report concludes with recommendations for policymakers and decision-makers at the national and the school level for short, medium and long-term strategies aimed at remediating learning loss in MENA and creating equitable, effective and resilient teaching and learning systems which support access to learning, engaged learners and enabling environments. The recommendations are aligned with the Framework for Reopening Schools developed jointly by UNESCO, UNICEF, the WB, and the World Food Programme (WFP), as well as ongoing commitments to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and the Education 2030 agenda. The recommendations are categorised in three phases, in alignment with the various stages of the global pandemic:

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18 https://sdg4education2030.org/the-goal.
20 Countries in the MENA region are going through different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, and tremendous efforts have been already made by the governments to mitigate the learning loss. Policy-makers could use this phasing as a reference to reflect and adjust the education response plans based on the actual situation in their countries.
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**Pandemic period: continuity and engagement**

1. Continue to address inequalities in access to and engagement in remote learning, ensure effectiveness of teaching and learning, provide access for early years, focus on foundational skills and prevent school dropout.

2. Provide stronger support and guidance to teachers to deal with the challenges and opportunities of the pandemic, strengthening teacher policy and investment in teachers.

3. Ensure ongoing engagement of parents and caregivers in their children’s learning with clear and inclusive communication strategies and supportive policies.

**Early recovery period: reopening and remediating**

1. Ensure safe school reopening based on evidence-based decision-making.

2. Conduct comprehensive learning assessments to inform education planning and enable the provision of compensatory quality education to all learners.

3. Support teachers to ensure that teaching is adapted to the learning levels of the students so that they can catch up and recover lost learning.

4. Implement remedial and catch-up learning policies and programmes to remediate lost learning.

**Post-pandemic period: accelerating and improving**

1. Develop and implement policies that enable accelerated learning for all learners, including the most vulnerable, while building more resilient systems.

2. Strengthen cross-sectoral coordination and provide holistic support for the rebuilding of equitable, effective and resilient education systems for all learners.

3. Identify mechanisms to finance the pandemic response in the education sector and advocate for efficient, effective and equitable investment in education.

The disruption caused by the pandemic has created an opportunity to not only recover lost learning, but also to build stronger, more resilient education systems that are better able to serve their students and societies. We must therefore seize this opportunity and take immediate action to ensure effective teaching and learning for all of the region’s children.
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An entire generation of children in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is estimated to be affected by the education crisis determined by the COVID-19 pandemic, with potential impacts that are going beyond the immediate/short term and also well beyond the education domain itself, with consequences on children’s socialisation, mental well-being, and future perspective of being active members of their society, including in the labor market. More information on the impact of the crisis would help countries to put in place strategies to mitigate the impacts. Timely investment and action to prevent extreme impacts of this crisis on education are of paramount importance in MENA, which already tackling a learning crisis before the COVID-19 outbreak.

The publication delineates the overall education status in MENA after the breakout of COVID-19 pandemic, by presenting the education responses in MENA, and assessing the potential learning loss through a simulation analysis, recommendations are provided on how to build back better and enhance access and quality learning for all.

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