



Pivoting to Inclusion: Leveraging Lessons from the COVID-19 Crisis for Learners with Disabilities

The issues paper, “Pivoting to Inclusion: Leveraging lessons from the COVID-19 Crisis for Learners with Disabilities,” highlights the emerging educational and social needs, barriers, and issues experienced by learners with disabilities.

Global Challenges

Key Messages



Children with disabilities are among the most vulnerable - facing multiple forms of exclusion linked to education, health, gender equity, and social inclusion. Those living in poverty are at risk of further marginalization.



At the peak of lockdown, the COVID-19 pandemic caused 180 countries to close schools temporarily, forcing 85% of the world’s learners out of school, furthering the risk of marginalization for children with disabilities.



During the crisis, the changing role of teachers has led to uncertainty regarding teacher responsibilities and ways to connect and support learners with disabilities and their parents.



COVID-19 points to the importance of access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). It also brings to bear how inaccessible these facilities are for many learners with disabilities.



The schooling and learning deficit experienced by learners with disabilities impedes the ability to earn income as adults, which impacts individuals, households, and communities, contributing significantly to a country’s human capital gap.



The digital divide exacerbates the learning divide among learners related to accessing equipment, electricity, and the internet for learners with disabilities who have an additional barrier of inaccessible learning content. Also, many remote learning options are not accessible to blind and deaf learners.



Parents also have had to adopt dual roles: being caregivers as well as teachers; often requiring reducing their workload or stop working to provide care and support. The situation is especially challenging for low-income families.



There are also health impacts for many children, for whom meals provided at school may be the only one they receive every day. Access to school meal programs can be the difference between malnutrition and adequate nutrition for optimal development.



It is critical to draw on lessons learnt from prior crises and ensure these lessons are implemented in planning for future events. For example, the Ebola crisis led to school closures to prevent the spread of disease, but there is little documented evidence of disability inclusion in education during that time. Such exclusions affect learners with disabilities in the long run, perpetuating the continued neglect of children with disabilities during and after times of crisis.



The Path Forward

Key Messages

Adopt a twin-track approach to disability inclusion in all phases of response: relief (immediate actions needed), recovery (medium-term actions to ensure safe reopening), and resilience (long-term actions).

We must rethink remote learning with an inclusive lens - every child, whether they have a disability or not, can access and participate in learning that takes place away from the classroom, likely in a home setting.

- Use the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that includes every child, to ensure multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression are utilized for learners to think, develop skills, and grow while at home.
- Information should be wide-reaching and available in multiple languages and multiple accessible formats to reach learners and families of children who are at risk of being excluded.

It is crucial to support teachers in three core areas: resilience, instruction, and technology- training must focus on responding to learning loss as well as supporting parents to engage while learners with disabilities are compelled to stay at home.

Ensuring safety, protection, and inclusion should be a priority when reopening schools.

- Children who are hardest to reach with remote learning, including those with disabilities, should be prioritized, where appropriate, among the first to have opportunities to return to school.
- Ensuring that all learners have access to inclusive WASH facilities is of utmost importance to reduce the spread of COVID-19

Additionally, a set of measures aimed at reversing learning losses will be needed, including better classroom assessment, smaller class sizes, more focused pedagogy, and curriculum, and better use of technology.

Social protection measures are essential to bolster income security and access to healthcare and contribute to disability-related expenses for children with disabilities and their families.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to promote disability-inclusive education financing and collect global, disaggregated data on disability to shape long-term, inclusive education models going forward.

The education crisis resulting from COVID-19 presents an opportunity to adopt a multi-sectoral, disability-inclusive approach to build stronger, more inclusive systems.