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# EDUCATION ON HOLD

A generation of children in Latin America and the Caribbean are missing out on schooling because of COVID-19

**EDUCATION ON HOLD:** A generation of children in Latin America and the Caribbean are missing out on schooling because of COVID-19

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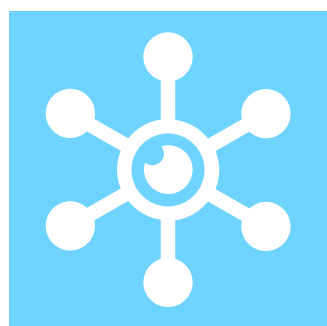


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## Definitions

- *Children not in school*: children who are physically not in school in face-to-face classes.
- *Out-of-school children*: children who were not in school before the pandemic who may either never have enrolled or who dropped out.



## OVERVIEW

Over 11 million cases of coronavirus have been reported in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup> More than seven months after the first case hit Brazil, COVID-19 has deprived 97 per cent of the region's students of their normal schooling.<sup>2</sup> Across the region, the prolonged closure of schools means that 137 million boys and girls continue to miss out on their education.<sup>3</sup> For each individual child, this loss has damaging implications for his or her future. With each passing day of schools being closed, a generational catastrophe is unfolding, one that will lead to profound consequences for society as a whole.

In other parts of the world, schools have gradually reopened, but in Latin America and the Caribbean, the vast majority of classrooms remain closed with no immediate prospect of reopening. The implications are troubling. In the space of a few months, hard-earned education gains are being lost. UNESCO projections show that over 3.1 million children across the region are in danger of dropping out of school. The longer schools remain closed, the less likely it is that the most vulnerable students—including girls, children with disabilities, migrant children and those from indigenous communities—will ever return.<sup>4</sup>

During months of confinement and other measures to counter the pandemic, millions of parents have lost their jobs and means of income. Especially those working in the informal sector will struggle to cover the expense of sending their children back to the classroom. As a result, enrollment rates are certain to fall. Projections show that across Latin America and the Caribbean, more than 3.1 million children may never return to school, while school enrollment of first-time students is likely to decline by more than 1.8 per cent.<sup>5</sup>



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Already, the percentage of children not receiving any form of education, whether remote or face-to-face, has soared<sup>6</sup>, effectively depriving some of the most vulnerable of an important means of protection. In a region that suffers some of the highest levels of violence outside of conflict zones, children staying at home due to school closures are exposed to threats that include child labour, adolescent pregnancy, early marriage or unions, as well as different forms of exploitation and family-related violence.<sup>7</sup>

School closures affect every student, but not all children are impacted equally. Those from poorer backgrounds will struggle if they lack access to a computer, the internet, or even a desk. The most disadvantaged children—including those with cognitive and physical disabilities, refugee and migrant children, and girls—face even more severe exclusion from the learning process.

UNICEF data show that in a region long characterized by high levels of inequality, COVID-19 has exacerbated deep inequities in the availability of education. For example, while three-quarters of children in private schools are able to access distance education, the same is true for only half of children attending public schools.<sup>8</sup>

The prolonged closure of preschools and early childhood education services deprives younger children of learning experiences at the specific time of their lives when they need those experiences the most in order to support their development. At this age, distance learning solutions have proved less effective, as the learning process requires direct interactions through play and other activities. More broadly, school closures are having an important negative impact on the learning of every student and on their ability to develop social and critical thinking skills.

Beyond the immediate impact of school closures on children, the financial consequences of the unfolding education crisis will ripple through the region's economies for years to come. According to data from the World Bank, school closures could cost the region up to US\$1.2 trillion in the eventual lifetime earnings of children who are now deprived of formal learning, equivalent to 20 per cent of the investments that governments make in basic education.<sup>9</sup>

Worse, the economic fallout of the pandemic is exerting severe pressure on national public education budgets. With a nine per cent contraction in GDP likely this year, Latin America and the Caribbean must act urgently and vigorously to prevent COVID-19 from

undermining the future of an entire generation of children.<sup>10</sup> The losses this generation may sustain in education and in their human potential jeopardize the region's hopes of economic recovery and long-term human development.

Working alongside national governments and other partners, UNICEF teams are on the ground protecting and reinforcing children's right to learn in every country across the region. Around 42 million students have received UNICEF-supported distance and home-based learning through radio, TV, the internet, and other platforms.<sup>11</sup> However, much more is needed in order to reach every girl, boy and adolescent who is currently not in school, especially those most at risk of dropping out. Until schools reopen, on-and offline distance learning solutions must be prioritized and further improved.

While countries are at different stages in terms of their epidemiological situation and schooling response to the pandemic, it is imperative for countries to prepare now for the safe reopening of schools in order to protect the learning and well-being of all children and adolescents. Health and safety as well as cleaning and disinfection protocols must be established and at least basic hand-washing facilities (with water and soap) should be put in place. In addition, teachers require special training and pedagogical approaches need to become more inclusive. Remedial education programmes should be made available.



The scale of the challenge is formidable. To take one indicator alone, four out of ten schools currently lack basic handwashing facilities.<sup>12</sup> Preparation for safe and effective school reopening requires close coordination between ministries of different sectors. Policies, strategies, procedures and protocols—underpinned by adequate financing—are also necessary to prepare for and implement safe school reopening and safeguard the right of every child to education and protection, with a special focus on the most vulnerable.

Although much is at stake, there is also a significant opportunity. By protecting and boosting investments in public education, governments can “build back better,” laying the foundation for education systems that offer children not only improved learning but a safer, more resilient environment than existed before the pandemic. Such a strategy will have a lasting impact not only on millions of children and adolescents but on the development potential of their countries in the decades to come.

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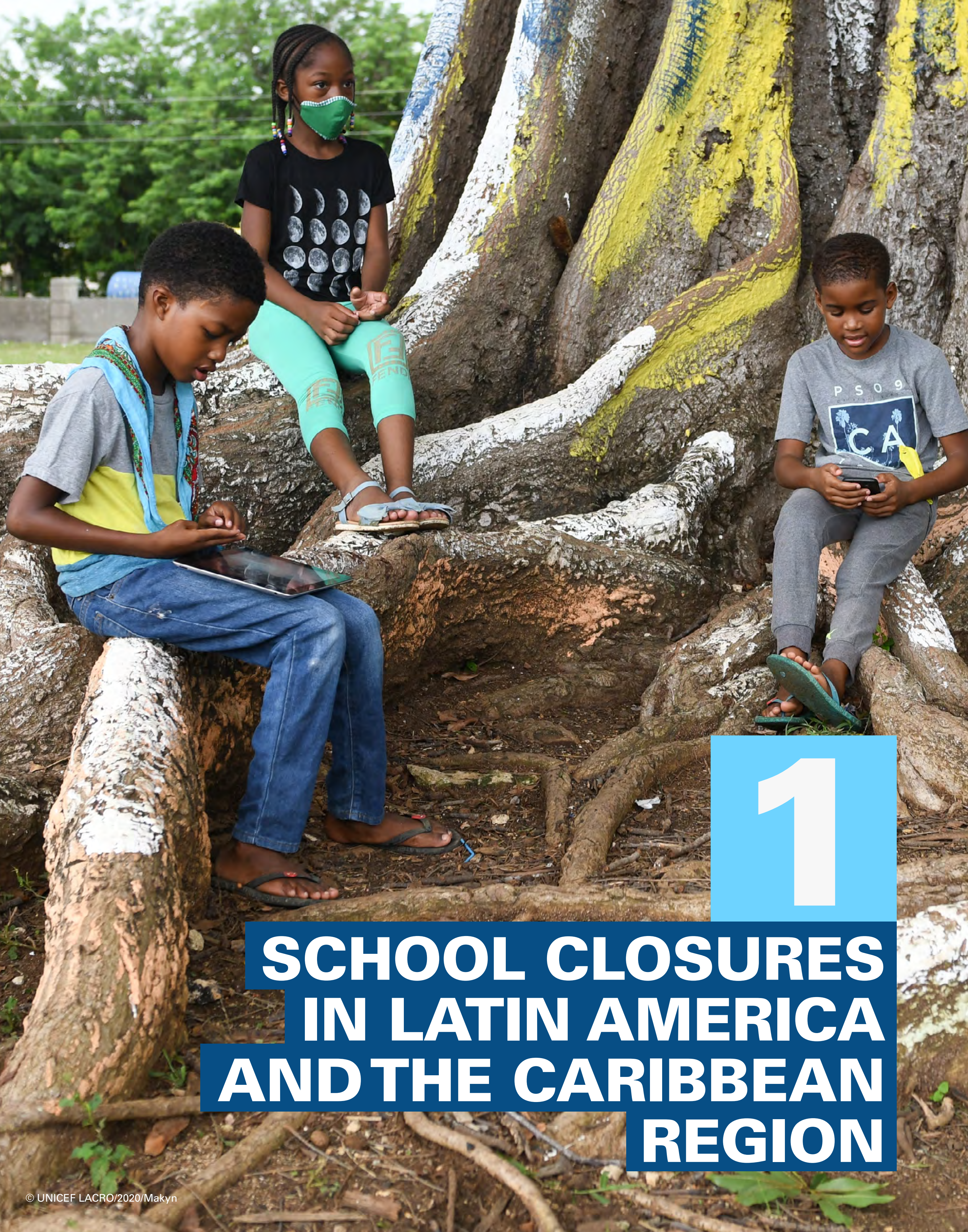
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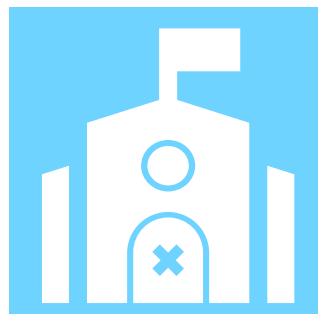


1

**SCHOOL CLOSURES  
IN LATIN AMERICA  
AND THE CARIBBEAN  
REGION**



1



# SCHOOL CLOSURES IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN REGION

More than seven months into the COVID-19 pandemic, and over 11 million confirmed cases of the virus<sup>13</sup>, over 137 million students in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have still not returned to school.<sup>14</sup> Having missed out on more than 170 days of learning, which is four times higher than the world average of 40 days, students in Latin America and the Caribbean are now at risk of losing an entire school year.<sup>15</sup> While many schools in Africa, Asia and Europe are gradually reopening, in 18 out of 36 Latin American and Caribbean countries and territories, the doors to classrooms remain shut.<sup>16</sup> As of 28 October, only 13 countries have fully reopened schools. 38 per cent of countries have yet to decide on a date for students to return to class.<sup>17</sup>

Many schools have decided to continue the entire school year through distance learning. Others are preparing to reopen through mixed modalities, including home-schooling.<sup>18</sup>

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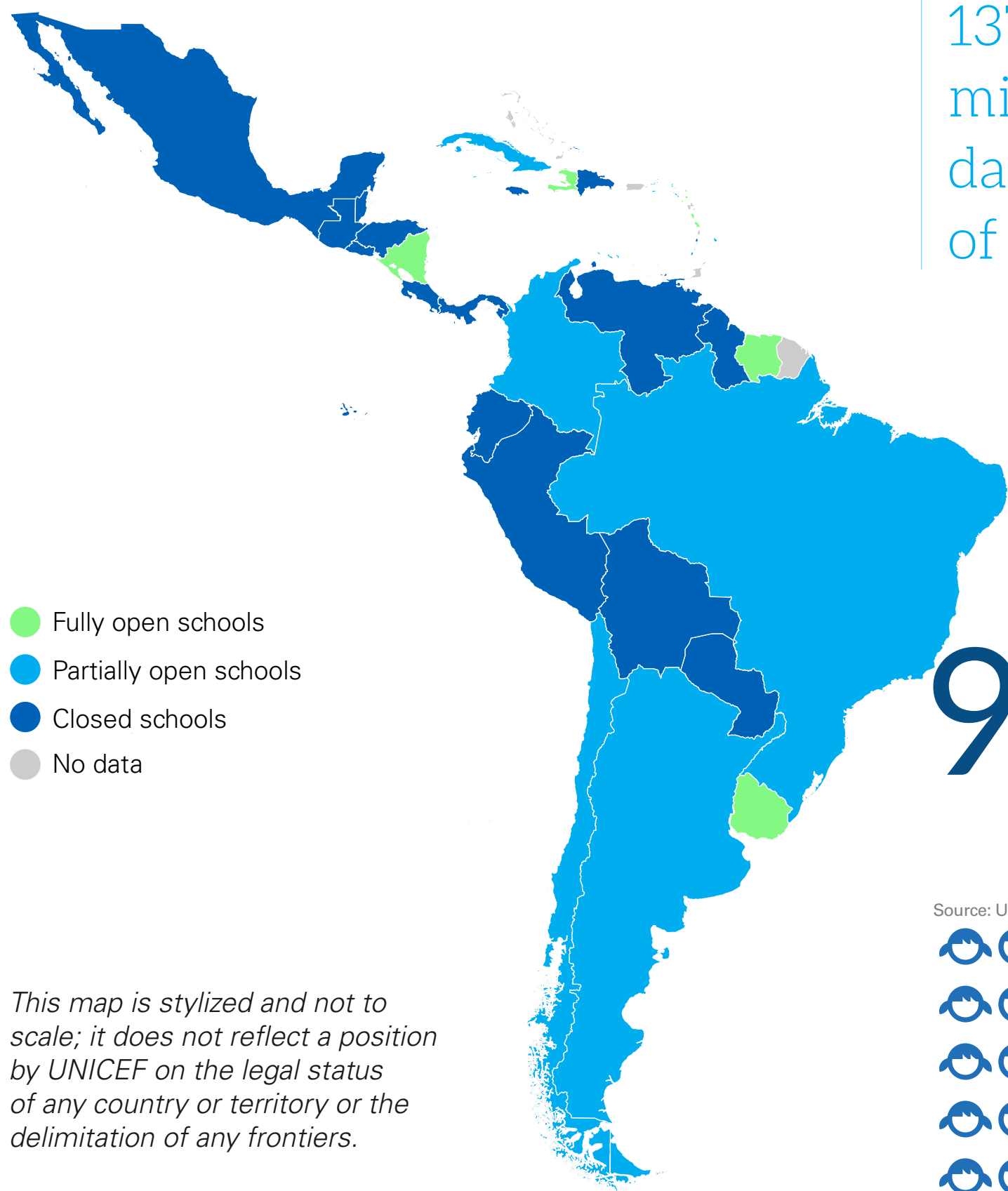
15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

137 million students have missed out on an average of 174 days of learning and are at risk of losing an entire school year.

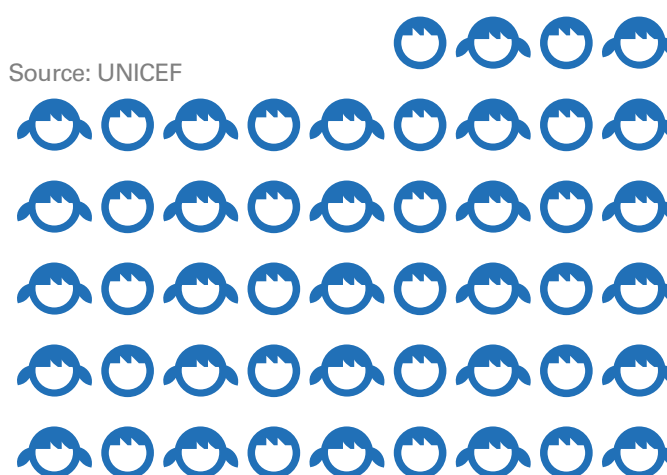


- Fully open schools
- Partially open schools
- Closed schools
- No data

*This map is stylized and not to scale; it does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.*

**97%** of the region's students has been deprived of their normal schooling

Source: UNICEF



# RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH PROLONGED SCHOOL CLOSURES

# 2



## 2



## RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH PROLONGED SCHOOL CLOSURES

When children cannot go to school, they are deprived of more than just their education. Without structured school time, children lose their routine and are unable to socialize with their friends. Some rely on school-feeding programmes and will therefore miss what may be their only nutritious meal of the day. Besides increasing their exposure to undernutrition, being out of school means children are at greater risk of other dangers at home or in their neighborhood, such as child labour, trafficking, adolescent pregnancy, sexual exploitation and abuse, child marriage (or early unions) and violence.<sup>19</sup>

### INTERRUPTED LEARNING

Efforts to contain the pandemic obliged schools to switch rapidly to distance learning methods, even though education systems, schools and teachers, not to mention parents and students, were largely unprepared. Governments, school administrators and teachers hurried to implement a range of creative solutions to allow boys, girls and adolescents to continue to learn at home. In a region where many students were already falling short of achieving basic proficiency levels at both primary and secondary levels before the pandemic, the impact of school interruptions on learning achievements risks being severe



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and long-lasting. A recent UNICEF and UNDP paper suggests that seven months of school closures are likely to result in a sharp increase in the number of high school students falling below the minimum proficiency level in reading.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the efforts of governments across in Latin America and the Caribbean since the pandemic began, new UNICEF data finds that one-third of all children in Latin America and the Caribbean are still not receiving quality distance education.<sup>21</sup> Distance learning methods delivered through the internet, TV, radio, smartphones and SMS require access to technology that is not available in all households. Most affected are vulnerable children and adolescents, including girls, indigenous girls and boys, children with disabilities, refugee and migrant children and children from rural areas.<sup>22</sup> Teachers also need access to adequate technology as well as training on distance learning methods. Parents and students need to be guided on how to work safely and independently online. This is



**One out of three children** are still not receiving a quality distance education

especially true for younger children, for whom online solutions may only work if supported by a parent and if there is direct interaction with their teachers. This is not always feasible, especially when there is only one parent in the household.

All children are affected by school closures, but not every child is affected equally. While three-quarters of children in private schools can benefit from accessing quality learning, the same is true for only half of children in public

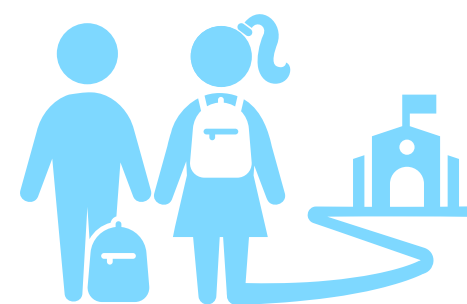
“I think the teachers have to understand us: right now, we don’t have money,” says Kristabel, a 12-year-old Grade 7 student. Her father, Óscar, explains: “They (the children) have to have internet. But internet, it isn’t free; and without internet they cannot finish school.” He says that without money to meet the basic needs of his daughter, he has resorted to begging in the street.<sup>27</sup> It is because of the situation. We don’t have food, and what worries us the most is the children, the food, the school, buying the internet.” In **Honduras**, less than 20 per cent of households have internet access<sup>28</sup>. As a result, it is estimated that one million students will not be able to finish the school year.

schools.<sup>23</sup> For the poorest and the most vulnerable, including children with physical and cognitive disabilities, learning from home can be an insurmountable challenge, whether due to the absence of a computer, internet access, parental support or even a desk.<sup>24</sup> In **Brazil**, for example, data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>25</sup> show that nine out of ten children and adolescents who were enrolled in school before the pandemic were able to continue learning at home. However, a separate UNICEF survey reveals that only 63 per cent of students received assignments and activities.<sup>26</sup>

### DROPPING OUT OF EDUCATION

The longer schools remain closed, the less likely it is that the most vulnerable boys and girls will ever resume their place in the classroom. According to UNESCO projections, more than 3.1 million children, adolescents and youth in Latin America and the Caribbean may never return to school due to COVID-19. Globally, it is likely that Latin American and the Caribbean region will suffer the second highest decline in school enrollment (1.83 per cent) across all regions.<sup>29</sup>

Already the number of children receiving no education whatsoever, neither in class nor remotely, has skyrocketed from 4 to 18 per cent over the past few months.<sup>30</sup> Many of these children, especially those from marginalized communities such as indigenous populations, migrants and refugees, may never return to school. Girls and children with disabilities are more at risk of dropping out of school, together with adolescent mothers, pregnant adolescents and children living in extreme poverty. Overall, in Latin American and Caribbean countries, 21 per cent of children from the poorest households are not receiving education of any kind compared to 14 per cent from the richest households.<sup>31</sup>



**3.1 million** children  
are in danger of dropping  
out of school

Source: UNESCO

### YOUNG CHILDREN’S DEVELOPMENT DISRUPTED

It is not only school-age students whose learning potential is being undermined as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The broader side-effects of the measures to contain the virus have also disrupted the progress of the youngest children, for whom the first three years of life are a unique opportunity to lay the foundation for their future health and well-being. These children need access to early childhood education programmes that prepare them for subsequent stages of their education. This is especially critical in Latin America and the Caribbean, where prior to COVID-19, 3.6 million three- and four-year-old children were considered at risk of not reaching their full potential<sup>32</sup> and where most early childhood services (such as home visits) and centres are disrupted because of the COVID-19 crisis.

Distance learning solutions have proved less suitable for pre-primary-aged children. At this early age, the learning process depends heavily on direct interactions through play and other activities with parents, caregivers and teachers. Prolonged interruption of these activities will have a detrimental impact on children’s ability to succeed in school and in life.



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## **VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

Before COVID-19, around 100 million children in Latin American and Caribbean countries between 2 and 17 years of age were estimated to have been exposed to or witnessed some form of violence.<sup>33</sup> With schools closed and with increased levels of stress among parents and caregivers, growing numbers of children have been victims of domestic violence, neglect and abuse, including emotional, physical and sexual violence. In recent months, there has been an increase in reports of domestic violence, including violence against children, throughout the region. At the same time, virtually every Latin American and Caribbean country has also reported that, due to the pandemic, the social services that would normally respond to such cases have been disrupted.<sup>34</sup>

The connection between infectious disease outbreaks and increases in gender-based violence (GBV) has been well-documented during earlier outbreaks of Zika, SARS and Ebola. Early evidence indicates that COVID-19 is no different in this

The connection between infectious disease outbreaks and increases in gender-based violence (GBV) has been well-documented during the Zika, SARS and Ebola outbreaks.

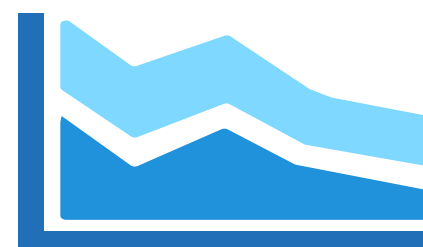
respect. GBV specialists and community groups report a sharp increase in reported incidents of intimate partner violence.<sup>35</sup> Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable: without targeted intervention, COVID-19 will heighten pre-existing risks of GBV against girls, stunting their social, economic and educational development while at the same time threatening their sexual and reproductive health and putting them at increased risk of unwanted pregnancy.

Latin America and the Caribbean could see the loss of as much as US\$1.2 trillion of income during the lifecycle of this cohort of students.

## ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

The COVID-19 pandemic is having both short and long-term impacts on society, threatening the hopes and futures of generations of children and adolescents. Measures put in place to curb the spread of the virus have caused many families to lose their main or only source of income. Unable to cover the cost of housing, food, and healthcare, families are struggling to make ends meet. Latin America and Caribbean is bracing for the worst recession in a century.

The economic repercussions of this crisis should be measured not only in terms of lost jobs and income in the present, but also the losses that will be sustained in years to come by the region's future workforce. According to data from the World Bank, each girl and boy in the current primary and secondary school cohort in Latin America and the



Education spending **may be reduced by more than 9% in 2020**

Source: UNESCO

Caribbean could lose between US\$242 and US\$835 in yearly earnings, equivalent to over US\$15,000 over the course of their working lives.<sup>36</sup> This will have a significant impact on poverty levels in a region in which inequalities are already pronounced.

Overall, the region could see the loss of as much as US\$1.2 trillion in income during the lifecycle of this cohort of students as a result of lost months of schooling, inferior learning achievements and increased likelihood of dropping out of education altogether, all hallmarks of a potential generational catastrophe.<sup>37</sup>

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**UNICEF  
EDUCATION  
RESPONSE**

**3**

## 3

**UNICEF EDUCATION  
RESPONSE**

Since the onset of the pandemic in the Latin American and Caribbean region, governments have organized a range of alternatives to school-based education to ensure the continuity of learning. The 24 UNICEF country offices in the region have supported Ministries of Education in developing multi-sectoral responses, including curriculum prioritization, teacher training and distance learning programmes. To help address the mass suspension of education services, 42 million students in Latin America and the Caribbean have been receiving UNICEF-supported distance and home-based learning delivered through radio, TV, internet, and other platforms. TV and radio have taken on an important role in the educational response for children without access to the internet, such as those in remote areas and from poor households.

In spite of this, 137 million children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean are currently not in school, and much more needs to be done to support their education.<sup>38</sup> Various distance learning programmes have been delivered, together with 'take home' paper-based packages including textbooks, worksheets, and reading materials. At both national and local levels, UNICEF has partnered with governments, public and private sector actors and community-based organizations to promote the continuity of learning that responds best to the needs and realities of children of all ages in the region.



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## It's been *difficult*

Wayne Young's eyes fill with tears as he describes how COVID-19 has affected his family. "It's been difficult," he laments. For his 11-year-old son Joel (pictured), this should have been a school day. But while Joel and his six siblings have been trying to keep up with their studies, Wayne is worried. "I think my kids them gonna drop back a lot," he admits. "They have no internet. We have no smartphone. We have no laptop because we can't afford it." The pandemic has highlighted the deep digital divide in Jamaica. Internet penetration is estimated at only 55 per cent, and there are glaring disparities between urban and rural communities. It was in this context that UNICEF Jamaica partnered with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information to launch

a Virtual Instructional Leadership (VIL) programme. The aim is to provide school leaders with tools to improve distance learning and options for remote contact with their school communities. Almost 1,000 principals, deans of departments and guidance counsellors have been trained so far. Among those enrolled in the course was Principal Keron Kin of Little Bay All Age and Infant School, where Joel Young studies. Energetic and creative, King started a pick-up and drop-off programme using his staff to deliver lessons to their 180 students on foot and by bike taxi on a weekly basis. So far, the system has worked and kept many students connected to schoolwork, but it isn't enough.

Important progress has been made. In **Mexico**, according to the #ENCOVID19infancia survey conducted by the Iberoamerican University and UNICEF during the 2019-2020 school year, nearly 90 per cent of girls, boys and adolescents participated in a state-run distance learning programme at home. However, the survey showed a 10 per cent difference between the participation of children from low- and high-income households. The results of the ENCOVID19 also indicated gaps in reaching the most

42 million students in the region have been receiving UNICEF-supported distance and home-based learning.

Girls, migrants, refugees, children with disabilities, out-of-school children, indigenous children, pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers all need additional support if they are to access and continue learning.

vulnerable children, especially in terms of access to distance learning modalities. Over half of all students learning at home said they studied online, 38 per cent through mobile phones and 32 per cent through television. Internet connectivity was identified as a major recurrent issue, magnifying the wide disparity between socioeconomic levels. Only 40 per cent of Mexican students reported having a stable internet connection at home<sup>39</sup>.

UNICEF involvement has taken a variety of forms. In **Panama**, UNICEF supported the development of daily television education programmes in Spanish, indigenous and sign languages. Short storytelling videos promoted reading skills for 390,000 young children and family members through social media. In **Guatemala**, with UNICEF support, the Ministry of Education developed a virtual education platform called Mineduc Digital for students from primary Grade 3 to high school Grade 5 to reinforce their learning from any device. In **Paraguay**, educational videos were produced as part of a learning at home strategy designed to help parents create early learning opportunities at home for younger children, including an introduction to reading. The initiative also supported students from primary Grades 1-6 to engage in Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math (STEAM), strengthening their knowledge and skills in problem solving, creativity, and teamwork.

### VULNERABLE GROUPS

For some vulnerable groups of children, accessing and staying in school is a daunting challenge. Girls, migrants, refugees, children with disabilities, out-of-school children, indigenous children, pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers all need additional support if they are to access and continue learning. Particularly affected are girls and women who often take on the unpaid work of

caring for younger siblings and doing household chores at the expense of learning. Meanwhile, children and adolescents with disabilities depend on materials that use accessible formats as well as assistive devices. Their teachers and caregivers need orientation and resources in order to support their education from home. Refugee and migrant children find it harder to access virtual schooling and other forms of education than do children from local communities.

In **Brazil**, UNICEF partnered with a local radio station in Boa Vista, Manaus and Belém to develop an educational audio programme in three languages (Portuguese, Spanish and Warao) focused on refugee and migrant children and adolescents. A different approach is being used in **Cuba**, where UNICEF has provided more than 200 children affected by autism and intellectual disabilities, together with their teachers, families and caregivers, with emotional and educational support through social media.<sup>40</sup> In **Jamaica**, UNICEF provided the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information with tablets equipped with safety protocols and approved learning applications to help more than 300 children with disabilities continue their education.

In line with a regional call to action promoting multicultural and bilingual education, UNICEF has lent its support to the development of distance learning materials accessible to many indigenous communities. In **Mexico**, for example, radio materials for remote learning have been translated into 15 of the country's 68 recognized indigenous languages. In **Paraguay**, UNICEF partnered with the Ministry for Arts and Sciences to create a podcast series based using an interdisciplinary and intercultural approach. The podcast was translated into four native languages and broadcast over 30 community and commercial radio stations that reach up to 26,000 students from indigenous communities.<sup>41</sup>



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## Linguistic and cultural *diversity*

In **Peru**, UNICEF has focused on ensuring continued education services for around 850,000 children speaking indigenous languages.<sup>42</sup> UNICEF supported the government efforts to implement the recently adopted national Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) policy in order to help rural and indigenous students access education that is linguistically and culturally relevant through the national learning at home (*aprendo en casa*) strategy. Radio-based distance education programmes are available in 9 of 48 indigenous languages.<sup>43</sup> In the Ucayali region of the Amazon, UNICEF delivered lessons through loudspeakers to a group of communities with limited connectivity, including the Shipibo. The intervention aimed to improve children's access to radio programming using the learning at home methodology.



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## Reaching their *full potential*

For children with disabilities and their families, continuing their treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic is critical. "A child who does not continue his or her regular therapy can regress up to six months for each month therapy is missed," warns Maria Delia Espinoza, UNICEF Child Survival and Development Specialist in Nicaragua. Two-year old Rouss (pictured) was born with myelomeningocele, a form of spina bifida that could prevent her from ever walking. She receives support and therapy from Los Pipitos, a UNICEF partner organization. "They helped us understand that if we worked together as a family, our daughter could overcome

her disability and have a full life," says Rouss' mother, Heysel. At the beginning of 2020, the girl's increased mobility was the pride of her family and therapists. But then COVID-19 took hold in Nicaragua, isolating families and forcing schools, special education services and centres to interrupt their services. UNICEF responded by reallocating resources to buy computers, cell phones and cellular data. As a result, Los Pipitos now uses WhatsApp, videos and phone calls to maintain virtual therapies with 164 children with disabilities, helping ensure that the hard-earned gains they have made are not lost.

As part of its regional response to COVID-19, UNICEF established partnerships with several organizations that support people with disabilities, among them, the Latin American Network of Non-Governmental Organizations of People with Disabilities and their Families (RIADIS), Special Olympics, the Foundation for the Cooperation and Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities (ONCE) and the youth group All Together in Action (META). UNICEF also created an inter-disciplinary task force of practitioners and specialists to provide digital resources, guidance and online capacity-building for teachers, families and caregivers.<sup>44</sup>

### SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMMES AT RISK

The closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many essential school feeding programmes, threatening children's right to adequate food and nutrition as well as their education. According to the World Food Programme, 80 million children in the Latin American and Caribbean region are currently missing out on what, for many, is the healthiest meal of the day, placing them at risk of developing nutrient deficiencies.<sup>45</sup> Families that have lost incomes are under additional economic stress.

80 million children are currently missing out on school meals and at risk of developing nutrient deficiencies.

### CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS

Across the region, UNICEF is working with governments to reach children with distance learning, but for the most vulnerable children, who do not have access to electricity, internet, radio and TV, learning is difficult and sometimes impossible. This is particularly true for girls, who —like their counterparts in other regions— face a gender digital divide which makes it harder for them to benefit from distance learning programmes.<sup>46</sup>

In **Colombia**, the greatest challenges are experienced by children in rural areas or zones affected by conflict, as well as by children from indigenous groups and other disadvantaged communities. To help address the situation, UNICEF has prioritized using print materials and learning through radio and television.



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## Teacher's visit

In Ecuador, almost two thirds of the country's households lack internet connectivity. As a result, many children —especially those outside of towns and cities— are unable to benefit from remote learning programmes. In order to keep up with her studies, 11-year-old Raiza (pictured) relies on her teacher, Doris, who makes regular visits to student homes, checking on their progress and assigning homework. Doris brings materials covering mathematics, Spanish and other subjects, as well as guidance on preventing the spread of COVID-19. "Raiza is one of my smartest students," says Doris. "She greets me with such joy every time I come to her house. Her mother is also very supportive and helps her with her homework."<sup>49</sup>

UNICEF Bolivia has joined efforts with TIGO Bolivia to provide teachers with digital skills training. Topics covered include internet safety and how to reach every child. By the end of July, nearly 8,000 teachers had completed the intermediate level of training and at least 512,000 children at preschool, primary and secondary levels had benefited from improved virtual learning methods. Forthcoming courses will include advanced digital skills, psychosocial support and violence prevention.

“The courses are quite motivating and not only technical,” reports Amalia Martha Calle Rosas Cabrera, a teacher from La Paz. “We as teachers needed a course that reminds us that we work with human beings, and that on many occasions, how we make a student feel is more important than teaching them data and information.”<sup>51</sup>

In **Argentina**, a survey conducted by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education showed that 1.3 million children had little or no contact with their teachers during the lock down. Only half of households with children have access to good quality Internet or a computer available for educational purposes.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, in **Bolivia**, a national opinion survey revealed that only 42 per cent of the population has a computer and just 10 per cent has a permanent internet connection. Among rural populations, those numbers drop to 18 per cent and 3 per cent respectively.<sup>48</sup> UNICEF has responded by stepping up support for delivering education through community radio.

In **Costa Rica**, UNICEF supports the government learning at home strategy, employing over 800 television and radio programmes to bring distance education to more than 1 million girls and boys, especially those from indigenous, migrant and vulnerable populations and children with disabilities. UNICEF is also supporting the Ministry of Public Education efforts towards progressively and safely reopening schools, delivering supplies, creating communication campaigns to prevent COVID-19, and implementing strategies designed to get all children into school, including the most disadvantaged.

### TEACHING AND TRAINING SUPPORT

The disruption of education caused by the pandemic has forced teachers to adapt their methods of teaching and their methods of providing feedback and support to their students. They need training and support in order to deliver effective learning both during school closures and when schools reopen. Meanwhile, parents and caregivers have taken on a

more active role in providing support to their children. Technology plays a vital role despite the worrisome issues related to equitable access.

UNICEF and various implementing partners are supporting teacher training in several countries, including **Panama**, where more than two thousand teachers have received training in virtual education skills. In **Colombia**, UNICEF supported a transdisciplinary strategy called La Aldea that allows teachers to combine curriculum with stories and games to strengthen children’s learning outcomes. More than 2.6 million children have benefited from a partnership between UNICEF and Millicom-TIGO, designed to ensure learning continuity for children affected by the lockdowns in nine Latin American countries: **Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and Paraguay.**<sup>50</sup>

### CURRICULUM AND LEARNING ASSESSMENT

With no end in sight to the COVID-19 crisis, national education systems need to develop a shared vision of learning goals for students both during school closures and for the reopening phase. Effective coordination between national and local education authorities and stakeholders is essential as curriculum priorities are set and throughout the implementation and assessment phases.

Existing curricula need to be adapted to fit remote delivery modalities and reduced teaching time. The content and competencies must be prioritized for different grades and educational levels in order to

Existing curricula need to be adapted to fit remote delivery modalities and reduced teaching time. Content and competencies to be acquired must be prioritized for different grades and educational levels in order to ensure the achievement of key learning outcomes.

ensure that key learning outcomes are achieved. Essential core content must be selected for skills development in (i) foundational skills (i.e. reading, writing and math); (ii) transferable skills (e.g. critical thinking, creativity and informed decision making) (iii) digital skills and (vi) job-related, global citizenship and sustainable development skills. Curricula should include socio-emotional support activities and this is a critical moment to remove stereotypical and discriminatory content from educational material.

These priorities have been at the centre of a collaboration between UNICEF **Mexico** and the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) to revise curricula contents in preparation for school reopening and to develop a proposal for selecting fundamental learning in the context of COVID-19. The revised curriculum focuses on consolidating learning and includes relevant topics such as disability, health and socio-emotional support.

At the subregional level, the Central American Educational and Cultural Coordination (CECC) and the Central American Integration System (SICA) developed an Education Contingency Plan for Central America with the support of UNICEF, adopted at the SICA Council of Ministers' special meeting on 30 September 2020. Among other key topics, the plan contains a chapter on the development of an emergency curriculum.

In current circumstances, teachers' ability to assess students' learning progress and adjust teaching practices accordingly is especially critical.

In order to support such a formative evaluation of students' learning outcomes, UNICEF is currently working on collecting evidence and creating policy recommendations for use in Latin American and Caribbean countries.

### **SUPPORT FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS**

Parents and caregivers find themselves on the frontline in responding to the COVID-19 crisis, caring for their young children, supporting their adolescents' continued development and helping them learn, all the while juggling the demands of work and family.

Safeguarding the family's well-being—including the physical and mental health of parents and caregivers—is essential to create a nurturing environment in which children feel protected and motivated to learn. To this end, early childhood services and schools need to provide parents and caregivers with as much support as possible, making information available to them and establishing helplines to foster dialogue that can identify the concerns of parents and caregivers during the pandemic.

Regular communication helps to reduce fear, to encourage children's return to early childhood centres and to schools, and to make it easier for parents and caregivers to understand and implement protection measures. To support the development of children during COVID-19, UNICEF has been supporting the implementation of evidence-based programmes such as Care for Child Development and has developed materials to help parents and caregivers talk to





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their younger children about the disease, engage in distance learning activities with their children and care for their own mental health. One example of this approach is in **Mexico**, where UNICEF is supporting

parents through a learning at home campaign and developing communications materials on topics such as positive parenting, home activities, and social-emotional support.

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- 44 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Learning together at home', UNICEF, Panama City, 2020, <<https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/learning-together-at-home>>, accessed 8 October 2020.
- 45 World Food Programme, 2020.
- 46 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 'Addressing the gender dimensions of COVID-related school closures', UNESCO, Paris, August 2020, <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373379>>, accessed 8 October 2020.
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A young girl with dark hair in two braids, wearing a white school shirt and a floral face mask, is sitting at a wooden desk in a classroom. She is holding a pen and writing in a spiral notebook. The background shows a green chalkboard and a yellow wall with colorful decorations.

4

**PREPARING  
FOR SCHOOL  
REOPENING**

## 4

 **PREPARING FOR SCHOOL REOPENING**

**T**he decision to reopen schools is specific to every country based on epidemiological evidence, public health and socio-economic factors, and a careful analysis of benefits and risks to learning. The decision should also be guided by the best interests of every child.

While the epidemiological situation is diverse between and within countries, the reopening of schools must be a priority for governments as soon as it is safe. Therefore, planning and preparing for reopening must be done as soon as possible using an intersectoral approach that addresses not only educational recovery but other risks that children and adolescents face when they are not in school. Planning for the immediate recovery should embrace a long-term vision that builds on the lessons learned from the disruption. The broad objective should be to lay the foundation for new, improved education systems that are more relevant and equitable to today's world as well as more resilient against potential future crises.

While the epidemiological situation is diverse between and within countries, the reopening of schools must be a priority for governments as soon as it is safe.

## GUIDELINES FOR THE SAFE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS AND ECD SERVICES

Together with UNESCO, WFP, the World Bank, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF has developed several intersectoral guidance notes on the safe reopening of schools. These include a global Framework for Reopening Schools and Regional Guidance Notes on Reopening Schools in the Context of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean for Ministries of Education and for School Administrators. The guidelines include recommendations and checklists to support the reopening process. To date, UNICEF has provided support to more than 25,000 schools to implement safe school protocols.<sup>52</sup>

UNICEF has also developed Guidelines for Reopening ECD Services in Times of COVID-19 to help ensure the safe reopening of early childhood development centres, nurseries, kindergartens, caregiving homes, preschool centres and other services working with young children aged 2-8 years. It is essential that these services are not interrupted, not only due to their contribution to health promotion and disease prevention, but also due to their vital role in the overall development of young girls and boys and their future ability to learn and succeed in school.

### PLANNING AND PROCESS

Preparation for the reopening of schools requires rigorous planning and a coordinated and integrated approach that addresses the holistic needs of children. Several essential interlinked components and steps are detailed in the Guidance Notes. These include overall planning for safe and gradual school reopening; setting up effective coordination

mechanisms between ministries of education, health, WASH, nutrition, protection bodies and all key stakeholders; effective communication and back-to-school campaigns; and developing policies, strategies and procedures/protocols that are underpinned by adequate financing and monitoring.

Preparation for safe school operation is a vital part of this process. The regional UNICEF, UNESCO and WFP guidance note on school reopening recommends seven areas for which protocols need to be established to ensure that schools are safe to reopen: access protocols; WASH protocols; physical distancing protocols; health protocols; cleaning protocols; disinfection and hygiene protocols; and school entry and exit protocols. For schools to reopen, basic handwashing facilities in schools are an essential hygiene measure, since handwashing with water and soap is among the most effective ways for children to avoid COVID-19 infection. Handwashing facilities in schools are critical to reach all children, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable, to facilitate their return to school, recuperate any learning loss, and allow them to continue to learn, all the while caring for their well-being and protection.

### RESUMING LEARNING

Once children and adolescents return to class, schools need to ensure that they continue learning at the appropriate level. Teachers must be able to assess children's learning levels, identify shortfalls or pre-existing gaps, and devise suitable recovery or remedial programmes. These may include formal alternative education programmes, tutoring, extracurricular classes, accelerated education programmes, or non-formal education programmes. Proactive measures should be taken to reintegrate vulnerable and out-of-school children and eliminate



## Reopening schools in Uruguay

After Uruguay confirmed its first cases of COVID-19, the government ordered schools to close. However, education was able to continue due to Uruguay's significant progress in connectivity since the creation of the 2007 Plan Ceibal (one laptop per child programme). On 8 April 2020, the government announced classes would resume in rural schools because of the low spread of the virus in those areas of the country.

A UNICEF report<sup>54</sup> on the country's school reopening details the strategy employed. To guarantee virus-free conditions, specific protocols were developed to protect children, families and teachers, including limiting classes to a few days a week with reduced hours, combining face-to-face with online learning and monitoring sanitary conditions in each location and within each school.

barriers to learning. This may include reviewing admission requirements to ensure that they are inclusive and eliminating gender-related barriers (such as assigning domestic tasks) or economic barriers (such as school fees). Strengthening distance education delivery and blended learning programmes will also be required. This will ensure that education can continue not only while schools are closed, but also as they gradually reopen, during which time schools can offer a mix of distance and on-site learning.

Teacher training is key to ensure safe school operations that allow students to resume their learning as well as protect their safety and well-being. To resume in-school learning, teachers require training and support to assess learning levels, identify learning gaps, and develop and implement remedial/recovery programmes. After schools

reopen, teaching should be flexible and adapt to blended modalities. To ensure that schools are safe, teachers must be trained to implement health, hygiene and social distancing protocols, monitor health indicators and have a reporting and referral system in place if COVID-19 cases occur. Teachers will also be required to ensure the well-being and protection of students by creating child friendly environments that are conducive to learning<sup>53</sup> and free of harm and abuse. To support teacher preparedness for the reopening of schools, UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean is adapting and translating 'Ready to come back: Teacher preparedness training package,' which was developed by UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office.

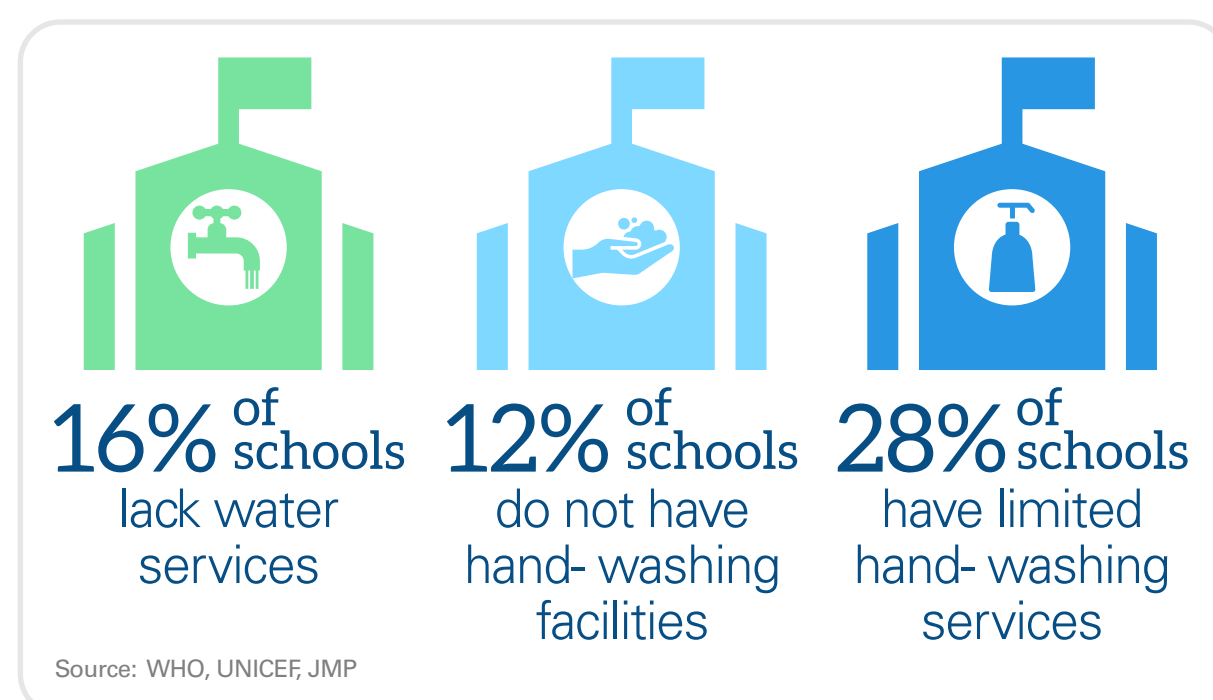
In several countries, UNICEF has helped governments to develop national plans and strategies for reopening schools. For example, in **Peru**, working with the World

Much remains to be done in the region to bring these services to the required standard.

Bank, UNESCO, and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), UNICEF led the formulation of the national Strategy Plan for the Safe and Timely Reopening of Schools, which was developed together with the Ministry of Education. In **Ecuador**, UNICEF has supported the Ministry of Education to develop and implement the National Plan for Educational Continuity, School Permanence and Progressive Use of Educational Facilities. In **Colombia**, UNICEF developed a series of pedagogical guidelines focused on supporting local governments and educational communities to manage the return to face-to-face classes.

At the regional level, together with the Educational and Cultural Council of Central America (CECC/SICA), UNICEF developed an Education Contingency Plan for the Ministries of Education of eight countries. This plan provides a subregional framework to organize the educational response to COVID-19 both in strengthening distance education provision and in planning for school reopening.

Most countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region faced significant gaps in the provision of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services in schools prior to the pandemic. In 2019, up to 61 million school-aged children across the region had limited or no access to handwashing services while at school.<sup>55</sup> One out of six schools (16 per cent) lack water services, 12 per cent do not have handwashing facilities, while 28 per cent have limited handwashing services (meaning handwashing facilities with water



but no soap).<sup>56</sup> Basic handwashing facilities in schools are an essential hygiene measure for schools to reopen, since handwashing with water and soap is an important way for children to avoid COVID-19 infection. All schools should strive towards making basic handwashing facilities available before moving progressively towards achieving basic water and sanitation services with a gender and climate-resilient approach. In addition to WASH facilities, adolescent girls require information and supplies to ensure that menstruation does not interrupt school attendance.

To ensure schools remain safe, UNICEF and WHO recommend a range of hygiene and disinfection measures. These include regular handwashing; daily cleaning and disinfection of school surfaces; basic water, sanitation and waste management facilities and services; and environmental cleaning and decontamination. Much remains to be done in Latin America and the Caribbean to bring these services to the required standard. Therefore, a phased approach is needed, setting minimum criteria required of all schools to reopen. Schools complying with the minimum criteria should be supported to reach the other phases of the approach.

In **Ecuador**, UNICEF partnered with the Ministry of Education to conduct a 'National WASH in Schools' assessment covering over 16,474 public schools. In the week of the survey, 26 per cent of public schools did not have adequate water services, 28 per cent lacked acceptable hygiene (handwashing) services and 20 per cent lacked adequate sanitation services. The MoE is now exploring ways to assign part of



## Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

The positive role played by the private sector in addressing WASH challenges was demonstrated by the Orbia group of companies, which contributed US\$500,000 in essential supplies towards the construction of handwashing stations in schools, health centres, childcare facilities and other high-traffic public spaces across five Latin American and Caribbean countries, as well as India and South Africa. The facilities are designed to meet the urgent needs of 450,000 people.

11-year-old Naydelin Núñez (pictured alongside her teacher) is looking forward to returning to her school in San Marcos, Guatemala, as soon as it reopens. However, she remembers that the school building had no running water, a fact that teachers say influenced class attendance significantly. With Orbia's support, a new pipeline has been installed in the community, providing drinking water to more than 300 families.

its resources to WASH services. The assessment was shared with Paraguayan authorities for potential replication in Paraguay. In general, both strong political will and an increase in investment across several key sectors are needed to more quickly close WASH service gaps.

### FINANCING

According to ECLAC projections, education spending in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2020 is likely to decline by more than 9 per cent —a dramatic reversal of the 3.6 per cent increase that was projected before the pandemic.<sup>57</sup> Evidence suggests that cuts to the education budget on this scale would be ill-advised and self-defeating and that education should be prioritized within national budgets. In addition to regular funds for public education, additional

resources are essential for school reopening. Additional resources are necessary for the cost of WASH installations, double shift classes, teacher training and remedial education programmes. Government projections for school reopening should also consider essential school infrastructure improvements.

Across the region, schools are at different stages of readiness for reopening. According to recent information, many schools in the region are not yet ready to hold face-to-face classes and plan to continue distance learning, including remedial programmes in reading, writing, and mathematics. Some have carried out teacher training activities. However, only 24 countries and territories report that they have developed safe school protocols.<sup>58</sup>



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Plainly, progress towards school reopening is still in its early phases and significant challenges lie ahead. Working together is the only way that we can limit the damaging impact this crisis has had on children, adolescents and their futures. UNICEF will continue to support governments and work with its partners to respond to the crisis, prepare for reopening and strengthen education systems to build towards a better future for learning across the region.



**24** out of **36** countries and territories have developed safe school protocols

Source: UNICEF (from information collected from 27 countries)

52 UNICEF, *LACRO COVID-19 Education response: Update 18*.

53 In collaboration with national governments and partners, UNICEF is supporting development of an online teacher training course: 'Creating Classrooms: Tools for Teachers in the Context of Emergencies' develop. The course covers Education in Emergencies; Well-being and Social Emotional Skills; and Adaptation and Creativity in Pedagogy and Curriculum. The training is led by Plan International and is a joint initiative of Save the Children, NRC, INEE, RET Americas, World Vision and UNICEF.

54 Alarcón, Anahí, Gustavo Méndez, 'Early Opening Schools in Uruguay during COVID-19 Pandemic: Overview and lessons learnt', United Nations Children's Fund, Montevideo, September 2020, <[www.unicef.org/uruguay/en/reports/early-opening-schools-uruguay-during-covid-19-pandemic](http://www.unicef.org/uruguay/en/reports/early-opening-schools-uruguay-during-covid-19-pandemic)>, accessed 6 October 2020.

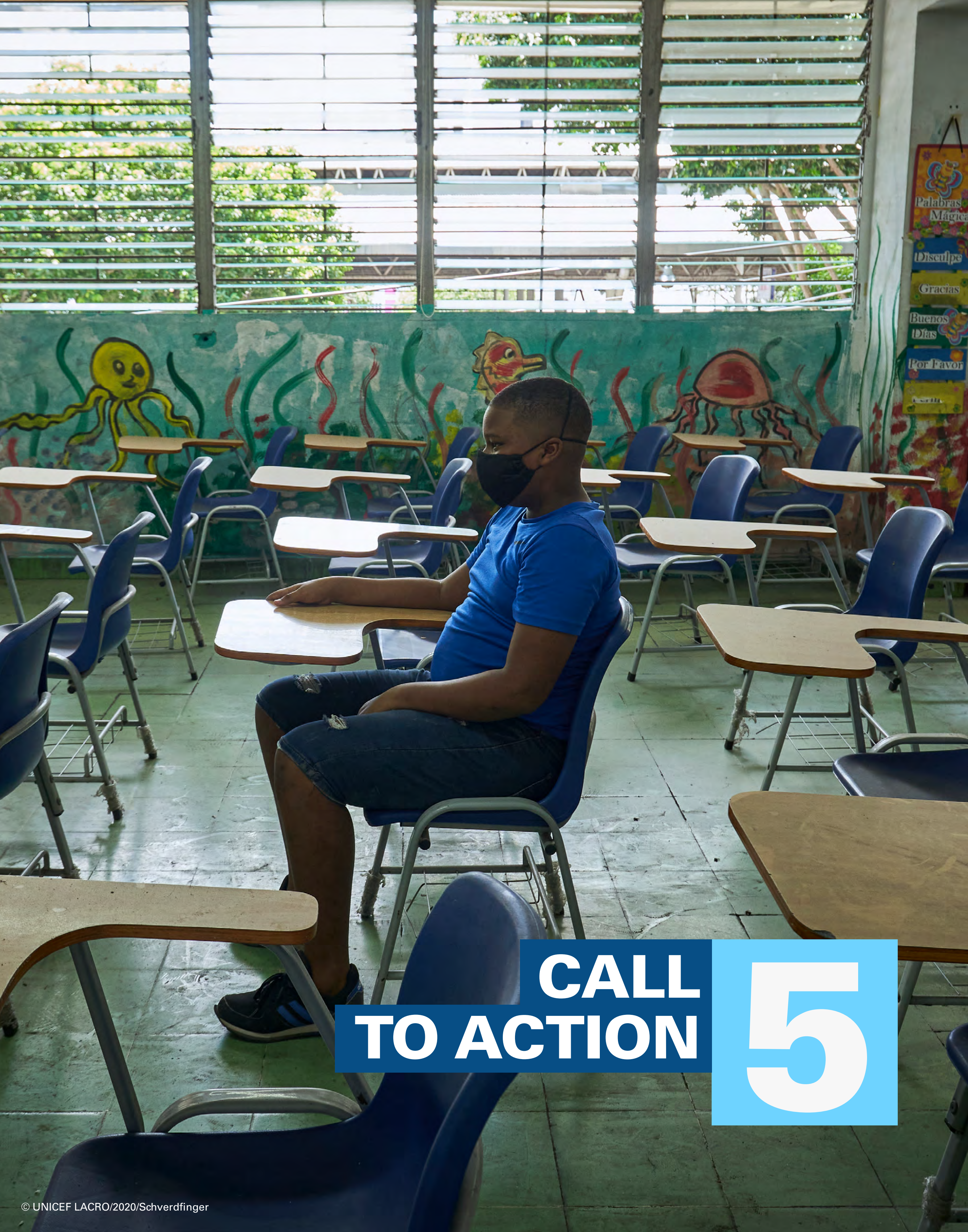
55 WHO, UNICEF, JMP, *Progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in schools*.

56 Ibid.

57 United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 'Education in the Time of COVID-19', ECLAC and UNESCO, Santiago, August 2020, <[www.cepal.org/en/publications/45905-education-time-covid-19](http://www.cepal.org/en/publications/45905-education-time-covid-19)>, accessed 6 October 2020..

58 UNICEF, *LACRO COVID-19 Education response – Update 17*.





**CALL  
TO ACTION**

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## CALL TO ACTION

The COVID-19 health crisis has evolved into a severe learning crisis across Latin America and the Caribbean, threatening the hopes and futures of an entire generation. UNICEF recognizes the efforts made by governments and Education Authorities in the Latin American and Caribbean region working in tandem with development partners to continue to mitigate the inherent risks that education disruption poses for children.

At the same time, urgent measures must be taken to safeguard the right to a quality education for all girls, boys and adolescents that underpins their future progress and well-being. It is not too late to mitigate the devastating impact of COVID-19 and prevent what could become a generational catastrophe. This crisis can and must be transformed into an opportunity to rethink and rebuild the region's current education system in a way that addresses its shortcomings and lays the foundation for a new beginning.

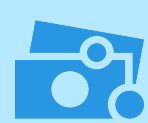
### At this stage of the COVID-19 crisis, UNICEF calls upon Latin American and Caribbean Governments to:



**(I)** Urgently prepare for the safe reopening of all schools, supported by rigorous planning and a well-coordinated and integrated approach that addresses the holistic needs of children;



**(II)** Prioritize the safe return of all children to school, guided by public health considerations in each country;





**(III)** Protect and increase public education budgets targeting the needs of the most marginalized children and;





**(IV)** 'Build back better' towards education systems that are more equitable, inclusive and relevant, as well as resilient to withstand any future crises.

The following main principles should be applied for safe school reopening:


 **best interest of the child:** reopening must be guided by a balance between health risks and the benefits to children's well-being and learning;


 **context specificity:** decisions on and approaches to reopening must be context-specific, flexible and responsive to changing situations;


 **inclusiveness and equity:** particular attention must be paid to the needs of vulnerable groups, i.e. girls, children with disabilities, refugee and migrant children, children from indigenous communities and those from poor households;


 **safe school readiness:** safe school protocols must be in place, and schools must have the capacity to ensure safe school operations that are aligned with public health measures.


**To bring the Call to Action to life, policies, strategies and protocols should be put in place and implemented across the region to:**


 **ensure safe school operations** which are aligned with public health measures and flexible to adjust as risks or changes in local virus transmission and conditions evolve. This includes ensuring WASH facilities and basic handwashing facilities availability as well as the implementing physical distancing measures, health, cleaning, disinfection and hygiene, and school entry and exit protocols;


 **facilitate the return to school and retention of the most vulnerable** girls, boys and adolescents, including through the elimination of gender-based and financial barriers. Measures could include cash or voucher assistance to vulnerable households; waiving school fees for preschool, primary and secondary education to support vulnerable children and adolescent return to school;


 **actively support the safe reopening of quality, age and gender-appropriate childcare and early childhood services,** accessible from birth to a child's entry into the first grade of school and affordable regardless of family circumstances;

 **ensure that every girl, boy and adolescent resume their learning at the right level** through assessing educational needs, preparing and implementing necessary remedial/catch-up programmes, training and incentivizing teachers, strengthening distance education, and adjusting the academic calendar, curriculum and evaluations;

 **maintain and reinforce distance learning** while at the same time putting in place blended learning approaches which alternate between face-to-face and distance education. While connectivity and access to high quality online courses must urgently be strengthened to close the digital gap, distance education should also be provided by revisiting the role of low-tech modalities such as radio and TV, particularly for remote communities;

 **make adequate funding available for safe reopening,** including funding to install at least basic WASH facilities and for teacher training, and remedial programmes. Investing in education for every girl, boy and adolescent will help lay the foundation for post-COVID-19 economic recovery;

 **guarantee the continuity of learning** of all girls, boys and adolescents through equitable access to online and offline programmes in inclusive formats, as well as essential services for their protection and well-being, prioritizing the most vulnerable populations. This requires the strengthening of connectivity, distance learning programmes and continued professional support for teachers, parents and caregivers;

 **scale up social protection measures,** the programmes and policies that connect families to life-saving income, health care, nutrition and education, including cash transfer support for food and nutrition.



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