

EDUCATION GAP WIDENED: UNESCO

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

Children who depend on the free noon meals at school are among the badly-hit.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities in education systems across the world. According to a UNESCO report released on Tuesday, about 40% of low- and lower-middle-income countries have not supported learners at risk of exclusion during this crisis, such as the poor, linguistic minorities and learners with disabilities.

The 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report noted that efforts to maintain learning continuity during the pandemic may have actually worsened exclusion trends. During the height of school closures in April 2020, almost 91% of students around the world were out of school.

“Education systems responded with distance learning solutions, all of which offered less or more imperfect substitutes for classroom instruction,” said the report, noting that while many poorer countries opted for radio and television lessons, 55% of low-income, 73% of lower-middle-income and 93% of upper-middle-income countries adopted for online learning platforms for primary and secondary education.

India has used a mix of all three systems for educational continuity. “Even as governments increasingly rely on technology, the digital divide lays bare the limitations of this approach. Not all students and teachers have access to adequate internet connection, equipment, skills and working conditions to take advantage of available platforms,” said the report.

School closures also interrupted support mechanisms from which many disadvantaged learners benefit.

Resources for blind and deaf students may not be available outside schools, while children with learning disabilities or those who are on the autism spectrum may struggle with independent work in front of a computer or the disruption of daily school routines, said the report.

For poor students who depend on school for free meals or even free sanitary napkins, closures have been a major blow. Cancellation of examinations in many countries, including India, may result in scoring dependent on teachers’ judgements of students instead, which could be affected by stereotypes of certain types of students, said the report. Higher drop-out rates are also a concern; during an earlier Ebola epidemic in Africa, many older girls never returned to school once the crisis was over.

In order to combat the situation, 17% of low and middle-income countries are planning to recruit more teachers, 22% to increase class time and 68% to introduce remedial classes when schools reopen, said the report. “How such classes are planned and targeted will be critical to whether disadvantaged students can catch up,” it added.

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