

# **ActionAid's 10-Point Call to Action for Education During Covid-19**







The spread of Covid-19 presents a major global challenge and is likely to have a particularly devastating impact in countries with weak healthcare systems and poorly resourced government infrastructure.

As a result of widespread government lockdowns in an effort to curb the spread of the virus, millions of education institutions have been closed indefinitely. UNESCO estimates that around 1.54 billion children and young people, i.e. 89% of all children enrolled in education across the world are currently out of school. If school closure is further extended, children risk falling behind and the most vulnerable students, (especially girls and the poorest) may never return, impacting both on their individual rights as well as wider socio-economic development. According to some [studies](#) the closure of schools during the Ebola crisis in 2014, increased girls' vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse both by their peers and by older men, as girls were often at home alone and unsupervised. In Sierra Leone, adolescent pregnancy was estimated to have increased by up to 65% in some communities during the Ebola crisis, and in [one study](#), most girls reported this to be as a direct result of being outside the protective environment offered by schools.

Now as the Covid-19 virus spreads, and families are confined and facing economic vulnerability and associated stresses, hundreds of millions of children find themselves isolated and [vulnerable to abuse, neglect and violence](#). In addition, when schools are closed, vulnerable children and youth miss out on regular school meals and social protection services. For many children, especially girls, education is a life-line, offering protection from harm and the potential for a brighter future. Whilst global attention is understandably focussed on the functioning of health systems and provision of care to ensure people recover and the spread of the virus is contained, we should not lose sight of the importance of education during the current pandemic.

As a result of chronic, sustained underfunding, public education systems in developing countries are ill-prepared to continue operating during this pandemic as governments have failed to adequately invest in strong, flexible systems that can rapidly adapt to and continue functioning during emergencies. This situation is further compounded by debt; a **new debt crisis** is currently squeezing public spending in low income countries. New research from ActionAid shows that countries spending more than 12% of their budgets on debt-servicing are invariably forced to cut spending on public services. Consequently, several countries currently spend more in debt servicing than on education and health combined. Any additional pressure on already constrained fiscal space will affect the recovery of many countries, and thus their preparedness to respond to future outbreaks.

The recent [Communique of African Ministers of Finance](#) of 31st March 2020, calling for urgent and immediate release of the US\$ 100 billion of which US\$ 44 billion will go towards debt relief for all African countries should be supported. In addition, conditionalities attached to loans from the IMF and World Bank are responsible both for limitations to the number of key public sector workers such as teachers and medical personnel that governments can recruit, but also, the increasing privatisation of services, leaving most of the population without access to quality public healthcare.

Covid-19 has opened up opportunities for private providers, particularly those operating online learning platforms and services, to fill the education gap left by the school closures. The digital divide will further increase and entrench social inequalities. The influence of the private sector in the education system is likely to continue beyond this crisis and we must remain vigilant that it does not lead to human rights violations. The [Abidjan Principles](#) provide good guidance to assess the suitability of partnering with different providers.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has already provided [US\\$8.8 million grant for COVID -19](#) response, which is welcome and will be distributing a further \$250 million to low income countries for the response.

As key education stakeholders ActionAid along with strategic partners the National Education Coalitions and the Teachers' Unions have a responsibility to participate actively in national Local Education Group (LEG) and education cluster meetings and contribute to the planning and monitoring of the utilisation of these grants. Our engagement in these fora can also help mitigate the immediate impact of school closures, particularly for more vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, lobby for the adoption of inclusive approaches to continued education during school closures and ensure teachers' rights are being respected.

Governments have a mandate both to protect children and to ensure that they learn. During this pandemic, governments need to be supported to, and held accountable for ensuring continuity of learning for all children in ways that are safe, appropriate and accessible. They also need to adequately plan short, medium and long term to analyse, mitigate and remedy the negative effects of school closures, particularly regarding access, progression and completion for disadvantaged groups.

Lessons learned during the Ebola epidemic of 2014 can help address the current challenge and ensure that a wide range of options (including low-tech and no-tech) are adopted that take into account both the digital and gender divide and acknowledge and support the role of parents and carers in ensuring children's continued education, even under extraordinary circumstances. Similarly, safeguarding vital services such as food distribution, ensuring availability of psychosocial support and preparing for an eventual, safe return to school will be critical.

This pandemic also offers a once in a lifetime opportunity to mobilise people to claim their rights and demand that governments fulfill their responsibilities to provide adequately financed, inclusive and gender responsive public education of good quality. Perhaps more than ever before, the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the impact of sustained under-funding of public services including health and education across the world. Working together, ActionAid and partners can use this opportunity to call for increased sustainable financing of public services through debt relief and progressive domestic resource mobilization!





## Our call to action:

1. **Debt:** IMF and all other lenders should cancel all debt servicing throughout 2020 and 2021, allowing countries to free up resources to respond to the pandemic.
2. **Wage bill containment:** The IMF should remove conditions and coercive policy advice that constrain public sector wage bills, allowing governments to recruit adequate numbers of teachers and health workers and adequately respond to the pandemic. See our new report [Who Cares for the Future: Finance Gender Responsive Public Services](#).
3. **Funding for education in emergencies:** Ensure education has space within the government's crisis planning and that funds are allocated for continuity of learning during emergencies, including pandemics.
4. **Ensure continuity of accessible, relevant and inclusive learning:** Ensure free, quality, public education that is accessible to ALL children during this time by adopting appropriate distance learning practices. In contexts where digital or televised learning options are less accessible, consider low-tech or no-tech options and ensure approaches are gender-sensitive. Accessible learning can include sending reading and writing materials home and using radio broadcasts to reach the poorest or most marginalised. Ensure programme scheduling and learning structures are flexible and allow self-paced learning so as not to deter girls who often disproportionately shoulder the burden of care. Learning material should include reliable, accurate and readily understandable information from the [World Health Organisation](#) to prevent and mitigate the spread of the virus.
5. **Child Protection and Sexual and Reproductive Health:** Ensure key messages about Child Protection (including referral and other support services available to children) as well as age-appropriate information on Sexual Reproductive Health Rights and education are included in distance-learning packages for children and young people.
6. **Safeguard vital services:** Ensure schools continue to serve as access points for psychosocial support and food distribution, work across sectors to ensure alternative social services and deliver support over the phone, text or other forms of media whilst taking into consideration the safety of the children and those delivering the services.
7. **Prepare for the safe return to school of all children:** Provide flexible learning approaches so that girls and other marginalized children are not deterred from returning to school when they re-open. This includes pregnant girls and young mothers who often face stigma and discriminatory school re-entry laws that prevent them from accessing education. Where education facilities have been used as emergency treatment centers, a thorough clean up and restoration to a quality safe learning environment should be done. Ensure education and health services are working together to ensure conditions are safe for children and teachers. to return to school.
8. **Ensure that all children are adequately prepared for examinations:** Where examinations were postponed, allow children enough time to prepare for the examinations so that even those who were unable to access distance learning are able to catch up and are not left behind. Consider remedial classes and extra lessons with teacher support or positive discrimination for disadvantaged children (reserving a percentage of places) in order to address disparities of education opportunity that may have increased during school closures.
9. [Ensure immediate support for teachers:](#) this crisis cannot be a pretext to lower standards and norms, or push aside labour rights. The salaries and benefits of teaching and education support staff must be preserved. Measures to protect and support teachers' health and well-being must be put in place as they cope with the pressures of ensuring continued learning during a time heightened anxiety.
10. **Make long-term investments in the teaching profession:** Sub-Saharan Africa has the greatest [teacher shortages in the world](#). Without an adequate cadre of motivated teachers, countries will not only fall short of achieving SDG4, they will be unable to train enough doctors and nurses to face future emergencies. This pandemic has seen an increased appreciation of the teaching profession from parents across the globe. This needs to be recognised, ensuring that the profession is valued and teachers are paid a living wage. Continuous professional development opportunities will also ensure teachers are well equipped to facilitate distance learning and actively participate in the response to this and future pandemics.

## Additional Resources

ActionAid is a member of the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). You can find a compilation of useful Education in Emergencies Resources for COVID-19 response (including manuals, guidance and webinars) on the [INEE website](#)

ActionAid is a member of the Teacher Task Force, which is calling on all governments, education providers and funders to support the 63 million teachers touched by the Covid-19 crisis. More information can be obtained [here](#).