



Background Paper 5:

Unlock Education for All: Focus on Children Furthest Behind

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About the campaign

Save Our Future is a global coalition of diverse voices - from CSOs to the private sector, youth to researchers, media to multilaterals, foundations to influencers and more - all uniting to deliver a simple, yet powerful message amidst the COVID-19 crisis: **Save Our Future**.

This campaign, supported by hundreds of organizations worldwide, is driving awareness and emphasizing the connection between education and advancing the other UN Sustainable Development goals; showcasing education solutions and innovations backed by evidence-based research; bringing together communities and diverse stakeholders to promote collaboration; and engaging people around the world in a dialogue around education to ensure all children can learn.

As part of the Save Our Future campaign, the Save Our Future white paper *[Averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children](#)* was developed and launched on October 22, with key actions and recommendations for global decisionmakers on protecting and prioritizing education amidst COVID-19.

For further information, please contact campaign@saveourfuture.world. To learn more about the Save Our Future campaign, please visit www.saveourfuture.world.

Background paper prepared for the Save Our Future white paper *Averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children*

Unlock Education for All: Focus on Children Furthest Behind

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Introduction

The adoption of SDG 4 in 2015 heralded a clearer focus on equity in education and presented an opportunity to monitor progress against ten associated targets. Even before the multi-dimensional crisis caused by COVID-19, global disparities resulted in a learning crisis revealed by poor education outcomes, especially in low-income countries (LICs) and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs). In response, many pre-pandemic efforts focused on expanding access to school by prioritizing the most marginalized children.¹ Yet over 258 million children remained out of school (UIS, 2019) and an additional 175 million pre-primary children not enrolled in education (UNICEF, 2019). And still, those enrolled in school were not achieving optimal learning outcomes. In 2017, 387 million primary school-age children and 230 million lower-secondary school-age adolescents were not achieving minimum proficiency levels in literacy and numeracy (UIS, 2017). In LMICs, 53 percent of children are living in learning poverty, unable to read and understand a simple story by age 10 (World Bank, 2019a).

The crisis caused by COVID-19 is exacerbating existing inequities across education systems worldwide. With school closures affecting 1.7 billion children globally, nearly 40 percent of low- and lower-middle-income countries have not taken any measures to support learners at risk of exclusion during the COVID-19 crisis (UNESCO, 2020c). Contracting economies and diminishing foreign aid funding threaten to significantly reduce national education budgets, which has the potential to adversely affect the most marginalized learners even more. Even before COVID-19, education spending in LICs showed severe inequities in financing and resource allocation at the country level, with an average of only 10 percent of public education budgets spent on the poorest 20 percent of learners (UNICEF, 2020b).

As the ecosystem of global education actors operationalizes plans to ‘Build Back Better’, actionable strategies and innovative financing mechanisms need to prioritize reducing inequities at all levels and create sustainable learning opportunities for all children, adolescents, and young people, especially recent and historically out-of-school learners. This paper highlights the need for targeted financing and interventions to ensure that marginalized learners enter, return to, and stay in education and attain foundational and transferable skills. It also emphasizes the importance of collecting robust, disaggregated data and leveraging data to inform policy and financing decisions to drastically reduce exclusion within educational ecosystems and enforce the fundamental human right to an inclusive, quality education for all children.

Barriers to learning were already pervasive

Inequities in education systems around the world were evident even before the crisis caused by COVID-19. Learning opportunities are unevenly distributed and barriers to quality education are often

¹ This paper refers broadly to marginalized children, which is inclusive of but not intended to be limited to children in poverty, children with disabilities, refugee, migrant, and displaced children, children associated with armed forces or groups, children from ethnic and linguistic minority groups, previously out of school children, and girls; we acknowledge that these identifying factors often intersect to create compounding circumstances of marginalization.

unreachable for the most marginalized children, adolescents, and young people ([UNESCO, 2020c](#)). Children and young people at risk of exclusion within educational ecosystems often experience compounding marginalization due to interrelated factors such as biological sex, gender identity, physical, sensory, and cognitive disability, income status, ethnicity, non-predominant language, geography, presence of conflict, and citizenship. While intentional investment in educational equity has the potential to improve access and quality of learning opportunities for the most vulnerable, current estimates suggest that countries face an annual financing gap between USD \$178 to \$193 billion for the 2020-2030 period, depending on assumptions related to the length of closures and economic impact ([UNESCO, 2020a](#)).²

Income poverty drives significant gaps in school attendance rates between the richest and poorest households. Among 65 low-and middle-income countries, the average gap in attendance rates between the poorest and the richest 20 percent of households was 9 percentage points for primary school-age children, 13 for lower secondary school-age adolescents and 27 for upper secondary school-age youth ([UNESCO, 2020c](#)). Multi-country studies also show poverty as a key driver of low cognitive development for children three to four years of age living in LMICs ([Black et al., 2016](#); [McCoy et al., 2016](#)). The relationship between family wealth and children’s learning and development outcomes has also been well-established, with each additional household asset improving learning and development by a range of one to three months ([Save the Children, 2018](#)).

Children living with disabilities are more likely to be out of school, and if enrolled in school, less likely to complete primary school and therefore less likely to develop foundational skills (defined in this paper as literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills) needed to live productive, healthy lives ([World Bank, 2020a](#)). In developing countries, more than 30 million primary and lower secondary-school aged children with disabilities are estimated to be out of school ([Education Commission, 2016](#)). Children and youth with disabilities who do enroll are less likely to complete school than others with resulting gaps in literacy rates between persons with and without disabilities widening over time ([World Bank, 2019b](#)).

More than 75 million children and young people living in crisis-affected communities face significant challenges accessing quality education ([ECW, 2020](#)). Crisis-affected children and youth live in war zones, endure extreme poverty, are affected by natural disasters and health epidemics, and experience political violence. Additionally, tens of thousands of boys and girls are recruited, many by force, into armed forces or groups, increasing their risk to trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder ([Overseas Development Institute, 2016](#)). Re-entry into their communities and schools introduces a whole new set of challenges for these children, including marginalization and ostracization, often by their own families. Active conflict zones also pose immediate safety risks for learners and teachers. Protracted crises related to drought and famine threaten livelihoods, which can reduce household spending on education over time, and widespread communicable health emergencies pause school operations with the risk of stopping entirely.

² All financing figures and estimates used in this paper are calculated and/or provided in US Dollars

Globally, there are **68 million displaced people**. Enrollment of refugee children in primary education is 77 percent compared to a global level of over 90 percent. But enrollment rates drastically decrease as refugee students get older, with only 31 percent accessing secondary school, and just 3 percent accessing universities ([UNHCR, 2020](#)). For refugees, stateless people, and undocumented immigrants, barriers to education emerge from laws that prohibit students from accessing national education systems. Globally, 48 percent of refugee children of school age are out of school ([UNHCR, 2020](#)).

Children, adolescents and young people from ethnic and linguistic minority groups face challenges to participate effectively in education. While data remains scarce, household surveys in Bolivia, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru show school attendance rates among 15- to 17-year-olds to up to 20 percentage points lower among indigenous language speakers than their peers speaking the dominant language ([UNESCO, 2020c](#)). In middle and high-income countries, grade four students who were taught in a language other than their mother tongue typically scored 34 percent below native speakers in literacy tests ([UNESCO, 2020c](#)). A recent survey of students across seven countries in Africa shows that only 11 percent of grade four students were able to read a paragraph in the national language ([Bold et al., 2017](#)).

Around the world, 5.5 million more **girls** than boys at the primary school level are out of school ([UIS, 2019](#)) and nearly one in three adolescent girls from the poorest households have never been to school ([UNICEF, 2020b](#)). In at least 20 countries where data was available, nearly zero poor and rural female students complete upper secondary school ([UNESCO, 2020c](#)) and only 25 percent of the poorest girls in low-income countries complete primary school ([World Bank, 2018](#)). Girls who attend secondary school are three times less likely to marry underage than their out-of-school counterparts.

In many contexts, learners experience a combination of factors which create **compounded marginalization**. For example, girls with disabilities are even less likely to enroll in and complete school than boys with disabilities ([World Bank, 2019b](#)). Girls living in crisis- and conflict-affected environments are almost 2.5 times more likely to be out of school, and young women are nearly 90 percent more likely to be out of secondary school than their counterparts in countries not affected by conflict ([UNESCO, 2015b](#)). A severe lack of data on children with disabilities in conflict settings suggest they are among the most adversely affected ([World Bank, 2019b](#)). And globally, refugee girls are half as likely as boys to be enrolled in secondary school ([UNHCR, 2020](#)).

COVID-19 is further exacerbating existing inequities

Before the crisis caused by COVID-19, marginalized learners suffered exclusion within education systems and out-of-school children faced high barriers to entry or re-entry. Amid the crisis caused by COVID-19, widespread school closures have further excluded already marginalized learners and out-of-school children and pushed many others to the margins.

Learning continuity amid school closures is dependent on access to technology and at-home support. Home-based learning in response to school closures amid COVID-19 relies largely on digital and broadcasting platforms, with a minority of countries supplementing school-based learning with take-home materials ([Dreesen et al., 2020](#)). Analysis of remote learning policies and access to technology across the world estimate that at minimum 463 million, or almost a third of students from pre-primary to upper secondary schools, were not reached due to either lack of remote learning policies or lack of technology ([UNICEF, 2020c](#)). Across the world, 75 percent of unreached students live in the poorest households and/or in rural areas, a share that is much higher in low-income countries ([UNICEF, 2020c](#)). Around 40 percent of countries had no remote learning policies in place for the pre-primary level, excluding the youngest learners from continued learning amidst school closures ([UNICEF, 2020c](#)). Learning loss could result in approximately \$10 trillion of earnings lost for this generation of learners which roughly then equates to \$16,000 of wages lost for each student over the course of their lifetime ([World Bank, 2020b](#)).

Access to technology, including television, radio, internet, cell phones and electricity, have become significantly more crucial learning tools, but also drivers of further inequity. In low- and lower-middle income countries, only 20 percent of households have access to the internet and around half have access to radio or television ([Carvalho & Hares, 2020](#)). Access within countries varies significantly as well. Fewer than 10 percent of the poorest households in Côte d'Ivoire, Lesotho, Kiribati, Sudan, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania have electricity ([Dreesen et al., 2020](#)). In many countries, including Lao PDR, Bangladesh, Madagascar and Togo, most children do not have access to the internet at home, and countries with overall low levels of internet access also have the highest level of income inequality ([Hereward, Jenkins & Idele, 2020](#)). Even access to broadcasting devices are unequal, with TV ownership rates among urban households more than double that of rural households with the largest disparities appearing in sub-Saharan Africa ([Dreesen et al., 2020](#)). For displaced learners living in settlements, infrastructure to support digital remote learning may be even more limited, especially for the 85 percent of refugees who live in developing or least developed countries where devices and connectivity, including to radio, are not readily available ([UNHCR, 2020](#)). The digital divide is exacerbated for girls as harmful gender norms and perceptions of risk to girls' safety or reputation make parents reluctant to allow girls access to devices ([Girl Effect, 2017](#)). Additionally, while the potential for EdTech to be used to expand access to more inclusive education systems has been identified ([Raja, 2016](#)), it was often not prioritized in countries' COVID-19 education responses ([McAleavy et al., 2020](#)).

Access to technology does not always translate into technology-enabled learning. A survey of secondary schools in Bangladesh found that only half of students with access to TV-based learning programs choose to watch them, and of the 21 percent of children who can access online learning programs, a mere 2 percent choose to do so ([Biswas et al., 2020](#)). This was attributed partly to the lack of instructional support at home. Half of parents from the same survey reported that they could not help their children with new topics. Between and within many countries, the share of parents who regularly assist their children with learning at home vary greatly, with wealth being a major determinant ([Brossard et al., 2020](#)). In Burkina Faso, wealthier households are more likely to report that all of their primary school-aged children are devoting time to home learning during school closures ([Innovations for Poverty Action, 2020](#)). In Ecuador,

although the majority of students, even those without home internet access, were taking part in remote learning, students from poorer backgrounds were more likely to not be engaged in any learning during the school shutdown ([Asanov et al., 2020](#)).

As schools reopen their doors, the number of out-of-school students could increase. Without targeted interventions, nearly 16 million students from pre-primary to secondary are at risk of not returning to education in 2020 ([UNESCO, 2020b](#)), in addition to the 258 million children already out of school. Prolonged school closures due to COVID-19 put previously enrolled children living with disabilities at greater risk of not returning due to parental fear for their health and safety, and lost household livelihoods ([World Bank, 2020](#)). In many countries, previous crises suggest that girls may face additional barriers to returning to school, due to poverty, unplanned pregnancy, and early marriage. For example, the re-enrollment of girls in Sierra Leone following the Ebola crisis was initially negatively affected by policies that did not allow visibly pregnant girls to return ([Bandiera et al., 2019](#)). Evidence from Sierra Leone also shows that the closure of schools during the Ebola crisis exposed children — especially girls — to a range of risks including domestic and sexual violence ([Plan International, 2015](#); [UNDP, 2015](#); [Odhiambo, 2020](#)). In the current crisis, more than 4 million girls could be at risk of early marriage due to COVID-19 ([UN Women, 2020](#)) and 7.6 million girls from pre-primary to secondary school are at-risk of not returning to education in 2020, with the highest risk for secondary school girls ([UNESCO, 2020b](#)). UNHCR predicts that 50 percent of refugee girls in secondary school may not return when schools reopen ([UNHCR, 2020](#)). Most countries have not established plans to monitor re-enrollment of students or conduct outreach to re-enroll previously enrolled students. Even fewer have established mechanisms to track the number of girls not returning to school, and outreach to children who were out of school even before COVID-19 was the least frequently reported as part of national responses ([Nugroho et al., 2020](#)).

Constrained budgets will likely further disadvantage marginalized learners

The multi-dimensional global pandemic is projected to cause an economic downturn even more significant than the Global Financial Crisis of 2009, making it the worst economic recession since the Great Depression ([International Monetary Fund, 2020](#)). With global GDP expected to contract by 4.9 percent as a result of COVID-19 ([International Monetary Fund, 2020](#)), education spending at the global and philanthropic level, country level, and household level is also expected to decline, disproportionately affecting equitable access to quality learning opportunities for the most marginalized learners.

Constrained education financing from global donor community

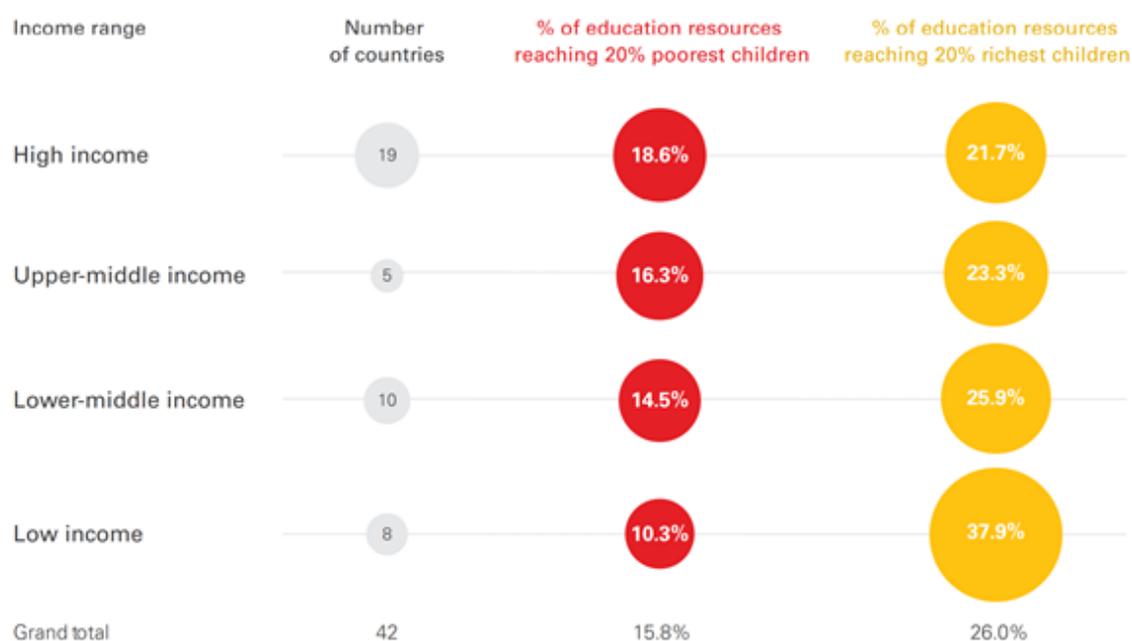
The COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to lead to a \$77 billion gap in education financing in LMICs over the next two years ([Save the Children, 2020](#)). New estimates suggest that between 2020-2022, there could be a drop as steep as 12 percent in aid to education ([UNESCO, 2020a](#)). This adds additional challenges to an already constrained environment, where education consistently receives less

aid from official and philanthropic donors as compared to other sectors. At the same time, addressing inequities within national education systems must start at the pre-primary and primary levels, where evidence shows investments contribute to the long-term gains. Currently, less than half - just 47 percent - of total aid to education goes to basic and secondary education in LMICs (excluding pre-primary) ([UNESCO, 2020c](#)). National governments spend more per capita on higher levels of education, including tertiary education, which the most marginalized children and youth are least likely to access. Research shows that public returns are highest for investments in pre-primary and primary education, yet public spending on tertiary education, often benefiting the rich, is typically much higher than public spending on pre-primary and primary education ([Education Commission, 2016](#)). See Save Our Future background paper [COVID-19 and Options for Financing Education](#) for further analysis on aid constraints.

Threats to education spending at the country level

Spending on education at the country level has risen over time but remains unevenly distributed for the most marginalized groups. Amid COVID-19 response and recovery plans, there are looming trade-offs that governments will need to make between education and other sectors, as well as within the education sector ([Evans et al., 2020](#)). Prior to COVID-19, countries demonstrated progress towards increasing public funding on education. In LICs, public spending on education on average increased from 3.5 percent of GDP in 2000 to 3.8 percent of GDP in 2015. In LMICs, the average also increased from 4.2 percent to 4.6 percent over the same period ([UNICEF, 2020b](#)). Despite gains in overall increases in public education spending for countries, the distribution of spending at the country level remains highly inequitable.

Evidence from 42 countries shows that, on average, around 16 percent of public education spending goes towards the poorest 20 percent of children in school, compared to 26 percent that goes towards the wealthiest 20 percent of children in school (See Figure 1). This spending gap is even more pronounced in LICs, where as little as 10 percent of public education expenditure goes to the poorest 20 percent of learners, while 38 percent goes to the richest 20 percent of learners ([UNICEF, 2020b](#)).

Figure 1: Average share of public education resources for children from the poorest and richest quintiles

Source: UNICEF calculations using the World Inequality Database on Education and UIS data ([UNICEF, 2020b](#))

Disparities in education spending between wealth quintiles are even more evident during humanitarian crises. In Guinea, which endured the 2014-16 Ebola outbreak, children from the richest households receive nearly nine times the amount of public education spending than children from the poorest households ([UNICEF, 2020b](#)). In the Central Africa Republic, where people have suffered from years of protracted armed conflict,³ children from the poorest quintile benefit from only 5 percent of public education spending ([UNICEF, 2020b](#)). Spending disparities in humanitarian crises are linked to severe shortages in humanitarian funding for education globally, as only 5.1 percent of humanitarian aid goes to education ([ECW, 2020](#)).

Widespread budget cuts threaten to reduce already limited public education spending for marginalized groups. Actions taken by countries in response to previous financial crises have widened gender disparities, as spending cuts typically affect services that disproportionately affect women ([Stavropoulou & Jones, 2013](#)). Just as gender-responsive budgeting has been crucial in understanding the impacts of budgets on girls and boys ([Unterhalter, 2007](#)), disability-inclusive budgeting at national and decentralized levels has the potential to mitigate disadvantages faced by learners with physical, cognitive, and learning disabilities to ensure quality education and optimal learning outcomes ([Global](#)

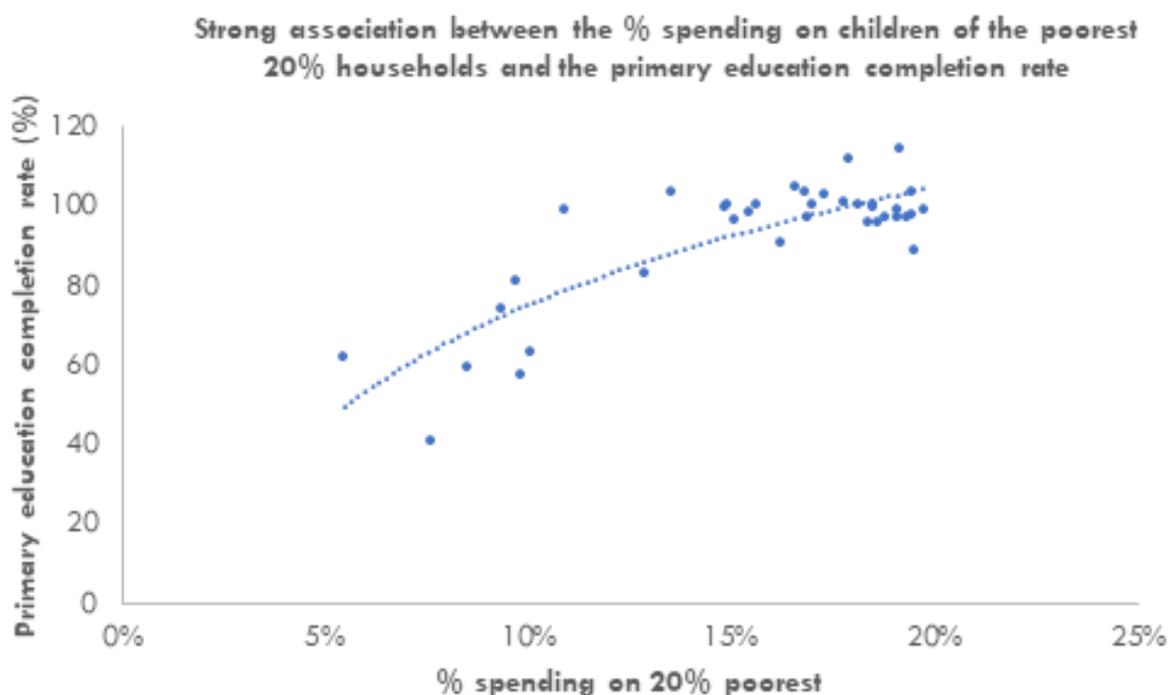
³ The ratios are calculated from household surveys and UIS data considering the population distribution among different wealth groups.

[Campaign for Education & Humanity and Inclusion, 2014](#); [UNESCO, 2015a](#)). Only 31 low- and middle-income countries have specific budget allocations for students with disabilities or for special education ([Development Finance International, 2016](#)).

Country-level education spending down to the student level is determined by budgeting methods, which have the potential to be reformed for more inclusive allocations and greater learning outcomes. Based on analysis by the [Education Commission \(2016\)](#), “Financing formulas at the country-level are usually based on one or more of the following: horizontal equity (equal amount of money per child), vertical equity (different amounts of money per child), and equal opportunity (funding based on the principles that there should be no relation between certain socio-economic student characteristics and schooling outcomes).” Several countries, including Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zambia, have adopted needs-based financing models to support greater equity in education spending. Rwanda introduced an allocation formula for block grants to local governments that included weighting for population, poverty, area, and the estimated financing gap between revenue collected and costs ([Education Commission, 2016](#)).

Spending on the poorest learners most at risk of exclusion can deliver greater returns on investment, compared to spending which often favors the richest ([Education Commission, 2016](#)). Budget allocations by education level, ranging from early childhood to tertiary education, also have the potential to be managed for greater inclusion of marginalized learners. Governments should seek to embrace principles of progressive universalism, which implies strongly favoring the allocation of public funding to the lower levels of the education ladder, and within that, to those left behind because of poverty, disability, gender, socio-economic status, among others. Research shows that public returns are highest for investments in pre-primary and primary education, yet public spending on tertiary education, often benefiting the rich, is typically much higher than public spending on pre-primary and primary education ([Education Commission, 2016](#)). Vulnerable children can benefit the most from investments in early childhood, but are disproportionately excluded from quality early childhood education and care ([UNICEF, 2019](#)). Every dollar spent on pre-primary education results in \$9 of benefits to society and a 10 percentage points increase in the pre-primary enrollment rate is associated with an increase of 0.14 years of schooling attended and with a 0.55 percent reduction in primary school repetition ([Muroga et al., 2020](#)). Yet, while quality early childhood learning is a critical method for closing equity gaps and preparing children to learn, only 46 countries have set a date for the reopening of pre-primary schools compared to other levels ([Nugroho et al., 2020](#)).

Children who face disadvantages early in their learning face compounding challenges as they move through grades. Data highlights that in both pre-primary and primary education, countries with higher levels of equity in resource allocation outperform those with lower levels equity in their allocation. There is a strong correlation between spending on children in the poorest quintile and primary education completion rates (see Figure 2). Further investment in early learning for the poorest quintile therefore has the potential to boost primary education completion rates ([UNICEF, 2019](#)).

Figure 2: Correlation between education spending and primary education completion rates

Source: UNICEF calculations using the World Inequality Database on Education and UIS data

Threats to education spending at the household level

Generally, the poorer the country, the larger the share of total education spending that comes from household-level investment (UNESCO, 2020c). Spending data from seven countries illustrates that, on average, household-level investment accounts for 22 percent of total education spending at the primary level, 39 percent at the secondary level, and 32 percent at the tertiary level (Education Commission, 2016). As a result, households play a significant role in deciding which children are sent to school, how much is spent on enrolled children, and which inputs are paid for by households.

There is evidence that suggests gender bias influences household spending, despite significant variation between countries (UNESCO, 2020c). In India, households spent more on education for boys aged 5 to 14, compared to girls (Kingdon, 2005). Gender disparities in household spending can increase at higher levels of education. In Pakistan, households spent more on boys once they enrolled in secondary schools. The gap in the probability of boys receiving more household resources for education was 13 percentage points for 5- to 9-year-olds and 24 points for 10- to 14-year-olds (Aslam & Kingdon, 2008). More recently, and conversely, a comparison of surveys in 12 Latin American countries found that households spent more on girls' secondary and tertiary education than that of boys (Acerenza & Gandelman, 2019).

High and variable levels of household education spending indicate that shocks to household income likely disproportionately affect marginalized learners in poor countries. A study of 100,000 children (ages 10-16 years) in Brazil found that economic shocks, such as parental unemployment, increased the likelihood of girls dropping out of school in order to find employment, and for some age groups by up to 60 percent ([Duryea, Lam, & Levison, 2007](#)). For displaced populations engaged in informal labor markets, threats to household income may be even more drastic. In Turkey, which hosts the largest number of refugees globally, 69 percent of households reported a loss of employment as a result of COVID-19, and 82 percent of households reported having no member engaged in income-generating activities, compounding challenges in accessing food, healthcare, education, and paying for other types of living expenses ([IFRC, 2020](#)). Among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, children in female-headed households are the most vulnerable, with 62 percent of mothers (who already face additional challenges in securing employment) more likely to engage their children in work ([Save the Children, 2018b](#)). In addition, children living with disabilities are at greater risk of not returning to school due to constrained household resources ([World Bank, 2020a](#)). Already, families of children living with disabilities often experience poverty as a result of significant caretaking responsibilities, which inhibit their income-earning potential ([DFID, 2015](#)).

To prevent growth of the out-of-school population, post-crisis interventions must prioritize reducing the economic burden of education. Household spending on education is disproportionately high in poor countries where public expenditure is relatively low. Amid widespread financial decline due to the crisis caused by COVID-19, constrained economies in already poor countries will inevitably see lost household livelihoods at scale. With less household income to invest in learning opportunities, evidence suggests that older students, girls, children with disabilities, displaced students, and those in female-headed households may be at greater risk of dropping out, even when schools reopen.

Evidence of policies to increase equity and inclusion and advance education for all

Included below are some targeted financing mechanisms and policy actions that could help to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on the most marginalized learners. These options are not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive, but rather highlight the evidence of what has worked in various contexts to help the most marginalized to access and stay in education.

Reducing the financial barriers for families sending children to school

Eliminating school and examination fees for students has been shown to increase student enrollment. Following a nine-month closure of schools in Sierra Leone to curb the spread of Ebola, the government introduced a number of policies to encourage a return to school, including waiving school and examination fees for two academic years ([Taulo, 2020](#)). Annual enrollment rates increased beyond the pre-Ebola period in the two years that the policy was in place ([Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education of Sierra Leone](#)). A systematic review of the impact of eliminating school fees identified rigorous evidence on the experiences of Kenya, Uganda and Malawi in, among other outcomes,

achieving longer duration of enrollment, reducing drop-out, re-enrollment and lower absenteeism ([Morgan et al., 2012](#)). In Nigeria, exposure to the Universal Primary Education program initiated six years after the end of the civil war found that it mitigated the negative impacts of the war on women's education attainment by almost 70 percent ([Akresh et al., 2017](#)).

Providing incentives to attend school, especially for the most marginalized

Programs that provide a financial safety net can support vulnerable learners to return to and stay in school. Unconditional cash transfer programs in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis found that families increasingly spent funds on schooling ([Hallgarten, 2020](#)). Conditional cash transfers have consistently been found to increase education attainment, with some evidence of impact on cognitive skills and learning ([Millan et al., 2019](#)). Conditional cash transfers in Latin America have increased education attainment by between 0.5 and 1.5 years. In Mexico, a conditional cash transfer program for health and education showed positive outcomes in reducing the age of children entering school as well as increasing the accumulated grades of schooling ([Behrman, Parker, & Todd, 2009](#)). For girls in Malawi, a conditional cash transfer program raised daily attendance 8 percentage points ([Baird, McIntosh, & Ozler, 2011](#)) and in Pakistan, enrollment for girls increased by nearly 9 percent ([Chaudhury & Parajuli, 2010](#)). Brazil is pioneering inclusive budgeting through cash transfer programs, guaranteeing a monthly unconditional minimum wage for the elderly and citizens of any age with a physical, mental, intellectual or sensory long-term condition living in extreme poverty ([IDDC, 2016](#)). It currently benefits around 4.2 million people, of which more than two-fifths of the beneficiaries are below the age of 24 and have a disability ([UNDP IPC, 2006](#); [Government of Brasil, 2016](#)).

Investments in rural schools to bring out of school children into the system

Following the economic crisis in 2005, one reform program in Argentina focused on improving access to education for rural populations in the Northwestern and Northeastern provinces through the allocation of block grants. The challenge in these regions included limited school coverage and the quality of education being significantly lower than that of urban areas. With high repetition and dropout rates and low population numbers, rural schools tend to be lower priority for allocation of resources. In response, a National Rural Education Program was designed by the government to provide grants for textbooks, learning materials, teacher training and upgraded buildings and classrooms among other interventions. Results of the program yielded improvement in pre-primary enrollment, which increased by 32.4 percent between 2004 and 2013, and lower secondary enrollment, which increased by 30.8 percent in the same period ([Bertoni et al., 2018](#)).

Supporting pregnant girls and young mothers

During the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, teenage pregnancies drastically increased, with some areas seeing a 65 percent increase in girls becoming pregnant ([UNDP, 2015](#)). Although the government banned pregnant girls from taking their examinations and returning to school at the time of school reopening, steps were taken to support the implementation of bridge programs that allowed pregnant girls and young mothers to attend school and return to school after childbirth, often in the form of

classes taught after the regular school day by teachers using the formal curriculum. Although the program was seen as discriminatory and against the principles of inclusion, it raised debate and increased awareness on the need to create inclusive policies that support pregnant girls and young mothers to continue learning. There are still 24 African countries that lack a re-entry policy or law to uphold the right to education for pregnant girls ([Human Rights Watch, 2018](#)).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for children with disabilities

In Rwanda, the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) and the Rwanda Education Board (REB) financed a remote learning program to ensure continued learning for more than 3 million students in response to COVID-19. Funding was provided to ensure that learning interventions were adapted for students with disabilities according to Universal Design for Learning principles. This included sign language interpretation for education programs broadcasted on television, learning materials with braille, and accessible digital Kinyarwanda supplementary readers and textbooks for early grade students with support from UNICEF, Humanity & Inclusion, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) ([Humanity & Inclusion, 2020](#)). The Ministry is also financing the dissemination of guidance for parents to support their children with disabilities. For example, head teachers and trained community volunteers are supported to reach out to families of children with disabilities over the phone or through home visits to ensure that children interact with learning materials and remain engaged ([UNICEF, 2020a](#)). Ensuring that children with disabilities are included in technology-enabled learning will be of increased importance as systems build in contingencies for remote learning.

Targeted school improvement grants for inclusive education

In Ethiopia, targeted school improvement grants for disability-inclusive education are part of Ethiopia's General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP) ([IDDC, 2016](#)). Under GEQIP, school grants support non-salary recurrent expenditure at the school level to improve education quality in Alternative Basic Education (ABE) centers and all government primary and secondary schools. All regions received 1 percent of their total allocation as an additional amount to support mainstream school facilities and resources for children with special educational needs in mainstream settings. School grant spending must be based on school improvement plans and targeted at activities that each school has identified as key to improving learning outcomes for pupils. Parents and community members are expected to take an active role in school decision-making, grant implementation and performance monitoring. Local flexibility was provided for regions to decide how to allocate the additional funds for special needs education. Some regions opted to share the grant across all mainstream schools accommodating children with disabilities; while other regions opted to target the response by focusing on equipping selected schools as resource centers for inclusive education or for screening children and purchasing assistive devices.

Targeted support to integrate out-of-school children into formal schooling

Accelerated learning programs (ALPs) are flexible, age-appropriate programs run in an accelerated timeframe that aim to provide access to education for disadvantaged, over-age, out-of-school children

and youth ([UNCHR, 2017](#)). Evaluations of ALPs and similar non-formal education offerings in Nepal ([Chavez et al., 2020](#)), Ethiopia ([Akyeampong et al., 2018](#)), and Rwanda ([Education Development Center, 2015](#)) show graduates achieving comparable or better outcomes as their mainstream school peers. Another proactive and community-focused initiative to supporting the return of out-of-school children into returning to formal schooling is the School Active Search program in Brazil, which has been implemented in over 3,000 municipalities. It provides a platform to support cross-sectoral teams at the municipal level in the identification, registration, and monitoring of children and youth who are out-of-school or at risk of dropping out. The entire process is managed online but accessible on a range of devices including SMS and printed forms for community agents and verifying technicians without access to mobile devices. Since 2017, over 60,000 children who were monitored by the program have re-enrolled in school ([Busca Ativa Escolar, 2020](#)).

Investments in quality pre-primary provision is critical to ensure children, particularly the most marginalized, are prepared to learn foundational skills

Despite evidence on the promise of quality pre-primary education, enrollment remains uneven. Only 22 percent of children in low-income countries and 36 percent of children in lower-middle income countries are enrolled, meaning millions of children are not on track to acquire foundational learning ([UNICEF, 2019](#)). Globally, only 46 countries have set a date for the reopening of pre-primary schools ([Nugroho et al., 2020](#)), signaling an inadequate focus on supporting young children in their early years of learning and development. Vulnerable children stand to benefit the most from investments in early childhood, but are disproportionately excluded from quality early childhood education and care ([UNICEF, 2019](#)). Research across a variety of contexts shows that investment in quality, playful early childhood learning opportunities can *close equity gaps* by raising up those more disadvantaged to be as ready to learn as their peers upon entering primary school ([Borisova et al., 2017](#); [Dowd et al., 2016](#); [Dusabe et al., 2019](#); [Johnson & Jackson, 2019](#); [Jung & Hasan, 2016](#); [Knauer et al., 2016](#); [Martinez et al., 2014](#); [Nores et al., 2019](#); [Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013](#)). Long term evidence from the US and Jamaica show that the benefits for disadvantaged children last well into adulthood and impact many more than just basic skills – enabling greater employment opportunities and stability throughout life ([Heckman & Karapakula, 2019](#); [Grantham-McGregor et al., 2016](#)). Yet, despite the oft-touted cost-effectiveness of early childhood investments, between 2012 and 2015 just 0.6 percent of \$11.7 billion in Overseas Development Assistance (just \$74 million) was spent on pre-primary education, with World Bank education budgets allocating only 2.7 percent to pre- primary education, and rarely in LICs ([Zubairi & Rose, 2017](#)).

Actions to strengthen equity and inclusion for all learners

1 | Establish equitable education financing models that allocate resources to the most marginalized children

- National governments to follow principles of progressive universalism when developing equitable education budgets and using financing formulas that prioritize funding to the lower levels of the education ladder, and to the most marginalized children.⁴ For example:
 - National governments should allocate at least 20% of public education expenditure to reaching children in the poorest quintile⁵
 - National governments to ensure gender responsive and disability inclusive budgeting practices that support girls and students with disabilities in returning to learning as schools reopen
 - National governments to allocate at least 10% of national education budgets towards quality pre-primary education
- National governments, with support from multilateral organizations, to provide equitable, targeted funding to households in need and eliminate/reduce education-related fees to reduce barriers to quality learning opportunities, especially for children out of school before COVID-19 and those at risk of being out of school as a result of COVID-19.
- International donors to prioritize equity in education aid allocations and prioritize early levels of education and programs that benefit the most marginalized.

2 | Ensure investments are made in the inclusive and equitable delivery of teaching and learning that supports all children

- National governments to develop or incorporate into their education sector strategy a twin-track approach towards inclusive teaching and learning for all children informed by Universal Design for Learning principles, which should apply to each aspect of the education process from teaching and learning materials to pedagogy, inclusive curricula, and more.
- Ministries of Education to support schools and the education workforce teachers to prioritize remedial and accelerated learning programs that support learners to catch up and strengthen foundational skills, taking into consideration individual learning needs.
- National governments to invest in flexible learning offerings that are disability- and gender-inclusive, that include non-formal accelerated education, that can facilitate the return to formal

⁴ As noted in the introduction, this paper refers broadly to marginalized children, which is inclusive of but not intended to be limited to children in poverty, children with disabilities, refugee, migrant, and displaced children, children associated with armed forces or groups, children from ethnic and linguistic minority groups, previously out of school children, and girls; we acknowledge that these identifying factors often intersect to create compounding circumstances of marginalization.

⁵ Governments should report this data regularly to custodian agencies of the SDG indicator 1.b.1 measuring pro-poor public social spending.

schooling and provide pathways to formal school for those previously out-of-school or over-age children and youth.

- National governments to invest in ensuring access to equitable and quality distance learning opportunities (high-tech, low-tech, and no-tech) by addressing the digital divide for the most marginalized learners and ensuring content is available in formats and languages accessible for all.

3| Make the invisible visible by strengthening systems that collect and monitor data for inclusion, with a focus on tracking the equitable delivery of education spending and learning for all children

- Ministries of Education and national statistical offices to strengthen timely annual education management information system (EMIS) data collection and publishing that ensures enrollment, attendance, transition and learning data is captured and disaggregated for marginalized groups.
- Ministries of Education and national statistical offices to strengthen equity in education by using household surveys to measure and monitor access and learning benchmarks, disaggregated by key marginalized groups, to include those who may be “invisible” to standard school-based surveys (such as out of school children, displaced learners, etc.)
- Ministries of Finance and Ministries of Education, in close cooperation with national statistical offices, to measure and monitor the incidence of public funding by education level for marginalized groups.
- International donors and multilateral organizations to develop tools to monitor and report whether their aid to education explicitly targets and reaches marginalized populations and to measure to what extent their aid contributions reinforce inclusive education practices that supports learning progress for all children.
- Civil society to track equitable budgeting and spending targeted at addressing inequities in access and learning for the most marginalized groups.
- Evaluations of COVID-19 responses of distance learning, remedial learning, and/or accelerated learning programs need to distinguish impact and/or further exclusion of marginalized children.

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