

COMMUNITY SYSTEMS COVID-19 RESPONSE DISCUSSION

During the Community Systems session, learning partners shared their experiences and observations on how COVID-19 is impacting schools and communities in their regions. This document summarizes the ideas shared.

What opportunities has COVID-19 presented in your region?

SEL and WCD: In many areas, there has been a greater emphasis on the mental health and emotional resilience of communities, which will hopefully extend to conversations around prioritizing SEL moving forward.

Technology and E-Learning: Actors and educators are developing a deeper and more coherent understanding of the role of technology in education. Not only are people beginning to understand its possibilities and limitations, but there are more conversations happening that address the role of technology in cultivating a resilient education system. Additionally, for many areas, COVID-19-prompted school closures have been the catalyst for leveraging existing but underutilized technology as well as exploring the integration of e-learning and tech-based platforms into the regular curriculum.

Awareness and Equity: For the first time, many actors are recognizing the equity gaps in access to technology and the internet, and conversations are evolving to discuss how to reach the most remote and marginalized learners in times of crisis and normalcy. Given this, there is the potential for rural education to gain attention in the public agenda.

Community Strengthening: COVID-19 has created increased opportunities to leverage non-traditional partnerships across the sector. Partners also notice school closures eliciting higher levels of investment in local schools from parents and communities.

What types of distance learning methods have been implemented in your region to reach students in rural and remote areas?

In many regions, radio, WhatsApp, printed learning packets, government-facilitated online platforms, television programs, and telephone phone calls have emerged as the primary distance-learning methods.

In terms of curriculum, many schools have moved towards project-based learning and have placed a greater emphasis on reviewing material rather than teaching new material.

Other innovative ideas include the development of peer learning communities for teachers and principals on addressing the SEL needs of students, the government distribution of tablets to remote learners, and the joint distribution of food and learning materials.

What new or enhanced public-private partnerships have you seen emerge to improve the quality and reach of distance learning platforms?

Public-private partnerships have emerged to increase not only the air-time of educational television and radio programming but also its quality. Public actors are increasingly turning to peers in the private sector to produce higher quality materials on a faster timetable than possible in the public realm.

Many internet and cellular providers are offering free or subsidized coverage to teachers and students. Additionally, many publishers have made online textbooks and resources open-source, creating accessible digital libraries.

Global organizations and corporations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, Google, and Microsoft are cultivating and facilitating partnerships in states worldwide to provide more equitable access to educational materials.

School closures include the cessation of school feeding programs. What programs have evolved to address this basic need in your region?

For many communities, schools remain the central point for food distribution programs.

Governments and private actors are doing what they can to provide food for families in need through cash transfers, humanitarian feeding programs, and the reallocation of budgets; however, in many rural and remote areas, adequate food distribution was a challenge prior to school closures. COVID-19 has only exacerbated a pre-existing issue.

Notably, ensuring distribution of food was one of the lowest ranked priorities in an OECD survey of countries during COVID-19.

How might country responses to the pandemic inform the future of e-learning and resilient education systems?

It is clear that traditional learning strategies will not reach everyone in the same way. This is an opportunity for countries to track the results of their most vulnerable students and develop specific strategies to reach them.

Education systems must consider how they can better support parents in adopting the role of interim teachers in future crises.

Prior to COVID-19 school closures, distance learning materials were not developed in a “careful” way. Creating strong content and assessing the most practical and effective distance learning methods by which to communicate the content, will better prepare school systems to have “off-the-shelf” resources moving forward and more resilient education systems overall.

Finally, educators must consider how to foster autonomy in learners moving forward, so they are prepared to take greater responsibility of their learning.