

EDUCATION CANNOT WAIT’S Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19’S DEEPENING IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND THEIR EDUCATION

In crisis contexts, where children already struggle to access learning, it is likely that an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic will be an exacerbation of global educational disparity as those learners fall further behind. The UN predicts that ‘in the most fragile education systems, this interruption of the school year will have a disproportionately negative impact on the most vulnerable pupils.’

As a result, dropout rates are likely to increase sharply with UNESCO estimating that an additional 23.8 - 30 million children and youth may drop out or lose access to learning during the 2020-2021 school year. Further, as with previous public health emergencies like the West Africa Ebola epidemic, the closure of schools translates into increased protection risks, particularly for women and girls.¹ As UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres states, without a massive and focused response for the most vulnerable of children, the world ‘face[s] a generational catastrophe that could waste untold human potential, undermine decades of progress, and exacerbate entrenched inequalities.’²

ECW’S INTERVENTIONS AND PROGRESS DURING COVID-19

As with the progression of the pandemic itself, the response to COVID-19 has evolved globally and from country to country. For education, this has meant establishing new ways of reaching children while classrooms remain shuttered and the development of safe learning practices as some schools begin to reopen. These efforts have inspired more innovation, an open dialogue to promote more inclusion, the scaling up of previously niche technological approaches to teaching, and practical risk reduction measures.

ECW COVID-19 Response Overview		Target Number of Girls and Boys	
April 2020 Allocation - US\$ 23 Million for 26 countries			
Total	31,502,661	51% Female	
July 2020 Allocation³ - US\$ 20 Million for 12 countries			
Total	867,600	53% Female	
Refugee children	587,300	68% of total	
Children with Disabilities	46,500	5% of total	
Pre-primary age	167,600	19% of total	
Primary age	498,100	57% of total	
Secondary age	201,900	23% of total	

Education Cannot Wait (ECW) and its partners have relied upon both the prevailing scientific evidence and the experience and ingenuity of educationalists to inform their response. In April 2020, at the onset of the pandemic, ECW released an early round of First Emergency Response (FER) funding to respond to the immediate needs of ECW investment countries. Then in July 2020, as soon as the first round of funding was under implementation, ECW

¹ United Nations, “Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women”, April 2020, available at https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_apr_2020_updated.pdf

² United Nations, “Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond”. August 2020, available at https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf

³ As the July Response had a specific focus on Refugee children, Children with Disabilities and Pre-primary and secondary level education, additional detail is provided.

commenced a second phase of the response focused on girls, displaced children, and other marginalized groups by deploying new funding to countries facing significant impact from the pandemic. Throughout its COVID-19 response, ECW has remained true to its commitment to ensure that pre-primary and secondary education, often forgotten during crises, feature prominently in ECW-funded interventions.

The Fierce Urgency of Now – ECW’s swift response at the onset of the pandemic

With experience working in the most challenging of contexts and with an understanding of the risks facing the most marginalized children, ECW acted swiftly as the impact of the pandemic became clear. Amid a truly global crisis, ECW had to look no further than the contexts already with ECW ongoing and planned investments to identify and prioritize countries where learners and educators were likely to need support the most. The decision to target these countries for specific COVID-19 grants helped to focus the response on the most vulnerable while also helping to protect progress that had been made through previous and on-going ECW partner interventions.

After careful yet speedy consultation with its partners in-country, ECW drew upon the entirety of its FER reserve **to allocate US\$23 million in a series of emergency grants for 26 crisis-affected countries**. These would support the rapid delivery of holistic education services, provided through 55 different grantees, aimed at protecting and supporting vulnerable children and youth impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴

The scope and speed of ECW’s response was unprecedented for the education-in-emergencies sector; both in the number of grants being delivered at once and in the speed of decision-making. The massive effort required new tools that placed a premium on efficiency and reduced the burden on its partner organizations. ECW worked to simplify and clarify guidance and application procedures, and to create additional flexibility for partners in countries with on-going investments so that they could best respond to the new COVID-19 related needs while addressing the most marginalized and groups left furthest behind. ECW provided new guidance for active Multi-Year Resilience Programmes (MYRP) that allowed partners to quickly react using their own localized, contextual understanding of what was required before having to seek approval from their donor.

Thus far, ECW supported activities have provided for continuity of learning for safety for children and educators upon their return to the classroom:

- **Radio and remote teaching** methods to reach children who cannot access the classroom safely;
- **Accelerated learning programmes** to support children who may have missed out on learning;
- **School meals or take-home rations** to improve nutritional standing of children and youth and to reduce economic burden on families;
- **Additional classroom space** to accommodate for physical distancing protocol;
- **Scholarships for girls** and adolescent girls to encourage improved and sustained girls enrolment;
- **Psychosocial support** activities to help learners, their families, and educators cope with crisis, maintain personal wellness, and remain engaged in or promoting learning;
- **Sanitation facility support** including gender-appropriate latrines, hand-washing stations and access to clean sources of water;

⁴ Education Cannot Wait, “Education Cannot Wait allocates us\$15 million in emergency education funding to support covid-19 global humanitarian response”, 2 April 2020, available at <https://www.educationcannotwait.org/covid-fer/>

- **Infection prevention supplies and learning activities** including distribution of thermometers, soap and hand sanitizer, and promotion of lessons;
- **Community engagement and awareness raising** to ensure children and especially girls are informed about back to school efforts, the case is made for equitable return to learning, and health and safety messages are shared.

A Laser Focus on the Most Vulnerable – ECW’s continued and concentrated response

Immediately following the April 2020 FER allocations ECW began to look at the successes and limitations of its response, and to seek from partners a gap analysis in their respective operations. The feedback allowed ECW to take critical looks at its own process and to identify important groups of learners in need of additional focus during subsequent stages of response and recovery. One of the clearest messages in ECW’s analysis of its first COVID-19 investments, was the need to reach more forcibly displaced children and youth, starting with refugees.

Mobilizing for refugees is extremely urgent at a time when they are particularly vulnerable to the Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath. The Covid-19 crisis is jeopardizing everything we have done for the education of refugees and migrants, their integration and chances of self-realization. We must strengthen our action in favour of the most vulnerable in order to guarantee them this fundamental right. – Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO Director-General

Along with the focus on refugees and IDPs, ECW also identified adolescent girls, children with disabilities, and the youngest learners as important groups for a focused response. Target countries were narrowed to those with significant populations of forcibly displaced children and youth, while guidance was updated to ensure more of these most vulnerable learners would be reached. Thanks to its committed partners, as of mid-August 2020, **ECW has been able to allocate an additional US\$20 million to its COVID-19 response across another 12 crisis-affected countries⁵.**

The time has come for decisive and game-changing measures to ensure that every refugee child accesses a quality education. Education Cannot Wait is taking such measures and we must scale up our support for this effort.⁶ - Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown, UN Special Envoy for Global Education

Through this second round of investments, ECW estimates that it will reach nearly 600,000 refugee children, almost 50,000 children with disabilities, and that over half of the resources will be dedicated to respond to the needs of girls and adolescent girls. This speaks directly to the gaps highlighted by partners and lays the groundwork for a sustained ECW response that is underpinned by analysis and evidence. And, as donor partners continue to make resources available during this time of enduring need, ECW will continue to work with its partners on the ground to identify and respond to the needs of the hardest to reach.

MOVING FORWARD

While the urgency of the ECW response to COVID-19 must remain, the efforts have thus far helped to validate part of the design behind ECW. While experiences will vary by country and by partner, ECW has been able to allocate funding with swift turnarounds on proposal development, approval, and fund disbursement. The efficiency of this process has certainly been aided by working in countries and with partners familiar with ECW investments, but also

⁵ Bangladesh, DRC, Ethiopia, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Libya, South Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia, Cameroon and Greece.

⁶ Education Cannot Wait, “COVID-19 education response for refugees and IDPs across 10 crisis-affected countries – ECW COVID-19 investments approved now total \$43.5 million”, 22 July 2020, available at <https://www.educationcannotwait.org/education-cannot-wait-announces-us19-million-in-new-covid-19-education-response-for-refugees-and-idps-across-10-crisis-affected-countries-ecw-covid-19-investments-approved-now-total-43-5-million/>

because ECW's model asks its partners to submit proposals that are aligned with in-country processes.

ECW has also been able to capitalize on its cohesive governance structures, the High-Level Steering Group and Executive Committee. By keeping these groups up to date on both country-level needs and Secretariat activities, ECW has been able to solicit informed feedback during and after each phase of the response. Moving forward, ECW will continue to actively evaluate its COVID-19 response to improve the continuing COVID-19 actions and to collect lessons that inform ECW's long-term growth. Further, the FER Evaluation that was planned prior to the pandemic has been adapted to include lessons from the April 2020 response. It is expected that this will result in further refinement of processes, reduced burdens for partners and ever-improving relevance of response.

Looking ahead: Recovery, back to school, and building back better

As educators and policymakers begin to look at how to reopen classrooms safely and to extend learning to those who cannot return to classrooms, ECW continues to investigate how it can best support those solutions. These will include short and medium-term actions like the distance teaching programmes that promote equity of access during school closures, as well as activities that make education systems resilient, thereby keeping children in education over the long-term. ECW will also continue to explore how innovative pedagogical approaches, such as *learning through play* can support holistic outcomes and also re-enforce resilience for children affected by crisis. ECW has the unique ability to support both the immediate emergency measures, and the resilience-building programming through its two country-focused funding windows:

Targeted FERs allow ECW to make resources available quickly should needs escalate or new crises arise. This allows ECW to respond to the immediate needs created by COVID-19 through the rapid implementation of inclusive safety, health, nutrition, sanitation, and educational measures that allow the most vulnerable children to safely return to learning.

By engaging both humanitarian and development actors, **MYRPs** create programming that maintains opportunity for marginalized children and youth and strengthens education systems to account for protracted or future emergencies. As ECW begins development of a new group of MYRPs, the experiences and lessons of the COVID-19 response will feature prominently as governments and stakeholders grapple with both crisis-response and crisis-sensitive planning.

ECW will also use the opportunity of the new MYRPs to explore innovative approaches to the delivery of education, including technological approaches that promote equity. This will be part of and contribute to ECW's continued work to foster inclusion for children who cannot engage in learning without support. Crucially, MYRPs also allow ECW to advance new practices in partnership by engaging the private sector and broadening the platform of supporters for education. Due to the multi-year and collective nature of these programmes, ECW can also build on its localization agenda by supporting the institutional capacities of local partners and begin to establish robust resource mobilization movements at the country level.