

Statement by the Signatories of the Pledge at the Global Refugee Forum to Make Geneva a Global Hub for Education in Emergencies

Education Cannot Wait (ECW), Global Education Cluster (GEC), Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), Switzerland, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), University of Geneva,¹ as well as International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Call for action to address the threat by the COVID-19 pandemic to the education of those left furthest behind



The global fund for education in emergencies



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UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a global health and socio-economic crisis; it is also a massive education crisis with potentially extremely severe ramifications, especially for vulnerable children and youth impacted by armed conflicts, forced displacement, and protracted crises.

We must consider the grave short-, medium- and long-term humanitarian, social, and economic consequences if education is left out of, or not prioritised in, the COVID-19 response. These adverse consequences must be prevented by collective, concrete action on the ground. The education sector is severely affected. The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted the schooling of some 1.6 billion children and youth in more than 190 countries. To prevent a major educational 'fallback' and subsequent societal, economic and protection consequences, countries are struggling to provide adequate home-based schooling and to put in place proper distance learning measures, and as schools gradually re-open, to ensure the smooth and effective reintegration of pupils while continuing to implement hygiene and sanitation measures.

However, countries affected by conflict and violence are hit much harder. Their educational systems were already facing tremendous difficulties prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, with millions of children and youth not attending school or those

attending not learning effectively due to the poor quality of education. Refugees and other forcibly displaced children, migrant children, children with disabilities, girls, street children, and other marginalised and crisis-affected young people are at risk of never returning to school. This in turn will have a long-term negative impact on countries' social fabric and economic situation, as well as on public health, security and protection. In countries affected by crisis, education will be left even further behind, with devastating results over time.

In countries affected by crisis and fragility, education is almost always severely underfunded. As the global recession will likely have an adverse impact on already reduced national education budgets in these countries by simultaneously causing tax revenue and international aid to decline, it will be critical to keep education high on the global agenda.

We, the signatories to the Global Refugee Forum pledge, urge the international humanitarian and development community to prioritise education and to do so in a coordinated fashion. We remind donors of the long-lasting consequences if education remains underfunded. We recall States' obligations to ensure that children and youth in countries affected by conflict and violence are safe, supported and able to continue to learn, during and also after the pandemic.

¹ The Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies was established following a pledge made by Switzerland during the 2019 Global Refugee Forum. The pledge was co-signed by: Education Cannot Wait (ECW), Global Education Cluster (GEC), Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and University of Geneva. The hub's intention is to leverage the Geneva international community by convening actors and creating synergies for joint action in order to bring education in emergencies to scale. As a relatively recent initiative, it is open to be joined by other governmental and non-governmental actors.



Photo: UNICEF

Every government, donor agency, humanitarian and development actor, along with academia, must work to ensure that education is not further de-prioritised. This will require that, according to their respective mandates, stakeholders:



• **Demonstrate political will and action through increased financing for education:** Help mitigate the impact of school closures in already extremely vulnerable countries by substantially increasing financial support to education in emergencies and protracted crises.



• **Act fast, keeping recovery and preparedness in sight:** Support Ministries of Education to ensure the continuity of learning with contextually available means and to quickly shift the delivery of education from school-based to remote learning - in line with the INEE Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response & Recovery. Plan for the safe re-opening of schools, which will require concerted, inter-sectoral support and coordination to ensure the safety of students and personnel. Engage in preparedness, crisis-sensitive and contingency planning for future crises.



• **Put human rights at the centre of the response, with particular attention to conflict-affected children and youth, gender and age:** Human rights, humanitarian and refugee law need to guide actions to ensure that the right to education is fully respected. Children and youth must be safe and continue to learn without disruption whilst schools are closed and have access to education when schools re-open. All must have equitable access to alternative education measures. Special attention must be given to those facing particular risks and vulnerabilities, including disabilities, displacement, and gendered risks such as sexual violence, early marriage, and

recruitment into armed groups or armed forces. Education must be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable for all ages. Refugees and displaced people as well as those affected by conflict should be included in the national response. For younger children, the disruption to their early education can have a profound negative impact on their cognitive, social and emotional development. Older adolescents who miss their final school exams may not ever go back to finish their formal schooling.



• **Act in a collective and coordinated manner and take a cross-sectoral approach linking protection, health and well-being in view of the return to school:** It is critical that donors, humanitarian and development agencies reinforce and support existing coordination arrangements to ensure that broader education in emergencies priorities are not forgotten. The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting various sectors, including health, education, WASH, food security, protection, and social cohesion. As such, the education in emergencies response necessitates a multi-sectoral intervention to address the complex needs for affected children and youth as well as their teachers and their parents. As the school closures are a secondary consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, cross-sectoral coordination, especially with the public health sector, is critical. The Global Education Coalition, for example, provides a platform for coordinated action to support countries to roll-out inclusive distance learning solutions and build resilience. If we manage to 'build back better', the COVID-19 education response could provide an opportunity for everyone to benefit from improved, more inclusive and resilient education systems.