

Building back better: National Response and Recovery Plan for reopening Myanmar's schools

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Schools in Myanmar have been shut since March to prevent the spread of COVID-19. With schools expected to begin reopening only after mid-July, children and youth will face reduced instructional time and dropouts are expected to increase.

To address this, the Ministry of Education (MOE), with the support of UNESCO, has developed a sector-wide [COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan](#), to ensure the continuity of education in Myanmar during and after the pandemic, to prepare for the safe reopening of schools, and to strengthen the overall preparedness of the education system for future emergencies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented levels of disruption to education globally. By 3 April, schools in 195 countries had been forced to close, affecting more than [91% of the world's student population](#). While the nationwide school closure in Myanmar largely coincided with the annual summer vacation, schools will open late, leading to students missing a month and a half of the academic year.

The extended closure of education institutions could potentially slow the learning progress of the 11.6 million students enrolled in Myanmar's education system, from primary to tertiary level. Young people are not only experiencing educational disruption, but also face significant challenges due to the health and economic impacts of the crisis.

As with the rest of the world, Myanmar's economy will be hit by COVID-19, and many parents are likely to lose their regular income-generating activities. This poses a greater risk of student dropouts, particularly for the most vulnerable, as well as negative impacts to the mental health and wellbeing of students, teachers and staff members from social isolation, stress and anxiety.

If not properly addressed, the pandemic is expected to have a long-lasting impact on the country's education sector, which has made considerable gains over the past few years following its ambitious reforms outlined in the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2016-2021.

Amid the public health threats and concerns regarding education continuity, the MOE has responded by developing a national response and recovery framework for the education sector. Beginning in May 2020, at the request of the MOE, UNESCO, through the [Capacity Development for Education \(CapED\) Programme](#), has supported the development process of the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan, with technical support from UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning, and in close consultation with partners from the development and education in emergencies sector. The framework's objective is built upon a learner-centred approach, to ensure that students in Myanmar can continue learning in a safe environment, with the overarching aim of "leaving no one behind".

The framework outlines a response phase, when education institutions are closed, and a recovery phase, when education institutions reopen. For both phases, priority actions have been defined by the relevant MOE departments for all the main subsectors in the education system: Basic Education, Alternative Education, Technical Vocational Education and Training, and Higher Education.

The plan's priorities take into consideration the different challenges faced by students in Myanmar, especially girls, migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, persons affected by conflict, persons with disabilities, poor students and other marginalized groups. For example, access to the internet, stable electricity and educational resources vary widely in Myanmar, exacerbated by the rural-urban, socio-economic and gender divides.

In this regard, the development and deployment of distance learning modalities have included options that can be accessed by all students – digital as well as low-tech and no-tech options. During the recovery phase, academic and administrative adaptations as well as remedial education will be introduced to minimize disruptions for students to progress to the next level.

While the pandemic poses many challenges, there are also opportunities to strengthen the longer-term resilience of the education system. To ensure that the education system can “build back better”, the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan includes a cross-cutting phase, to draw upon the good practices and lessons learned from this crisis, which will inform the strengthening of the education sector for future emergencies through crisis-sensitive educational planning.

This is an important component, especially for Myanmar as one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, exposed to natural hazards including floods, cyclones, earthquakes, landslides and tsunamis. These efforts will ensure that, in the event of future emergencies, the MOE and its partners will respond quickly and more effectively to the educational needs of millions of students in Myanmar.

In the coming weeks, as students begin returning to schools, UNESCO together with education partners will continue to support the MOE to adapt the framework based on the needs of students and teachers. The momentum in the education sector reform must be sustained, in order to achieve the overarching goal of the NESP: “Improve teaching and learning, vocational education and training, research and innovation leading to measurable improvements in student achievement in all schools and educational institutions.” The development of the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan, and the lessons learned from this pandemic, will be critical to strengthen the longer-term resilience of the education system, and to build back better for future emergencies.