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*Global Health Security*

## **COVID-19 and School Closures: Why Education Sector Needs Protecting**

*By Tamara Nair*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Around 90 percent of the world's students are currently out of school as a result of the global pandemic. How prepared are we to face the fallout of having schools closed for this long?*

### **COMMENTARY**

SCHOOLS ARE where socialisation is encouraged and rightfully so. They are microcosms of the societies within which students will ultimately be embedded to live their lives. But schools are also more than that. They are places, for many students in this world, where access to food, water, safety and well-being is guaranteed for at least as long as the school day.

Understandably, schools can also be hotbeds of infection given the close proximity of so many over a number of hours each day. And the young and very young are hard to convince when one speaks of social distancing. As of the end of March this year, [185 nations have country-wide school closures](#) and that accounts for 89.4 percent of enrolled students globally, from pre-primary, primary, lower and upper secondary as well as tertiary levels of education. This situation cannot be without repercussions and will not be an easy scenario to walk back from.

### **Schools: Provide and Protect**

The speed and scale of the current disruption is unparalleled in modern history. There are compelling reasons why keeping students away from schools, at least for this long,

may not be ideal and in fact can be detrimental not only to the students of today but also the security of nations in the future. This points to the importance of preparing educational institutions for large-scale disruptions by strategic planning and dedication of resources to keeping them open for as long as possible.

Schools are not only educational institutions, in many parts of the world, they are also kitchens that provide the only form of nutrition to many school-going children. Schools' feeding programmes are sometimes the only meal of the day that many children in the world have access to. At the moment, [300 million children](#) are missing school meals as a result of the virus.

The realisation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger is often through schools as well. School feeding programmes in countries like [Timor Leste](#) help with food and nutritional insecurities faced by children.

Similar to Timor Leste, the World Food Programme has feeding programmes in the Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar and Laos – all countries with serious rates of child malnourishment. Children could lose access to a daily nutritious meal if schools were to remain closed for long periods of time.

For many children, schools also equate to safety from physical harm and exploitation. When children are not in schools they become easy targets. They can be abused, set to work, exploited in other ways and even recruited into unsavoury groups or organisations. In fact, schools are also places where abused and exploited children are often identified.

This is not to say that nothing bad ever happens to students in schools. But for many students around the world, schools and the social networks and support they provide often create a sanctuary away from whatever trauma or terror they might be exposed to at home or in the streets, every day.

### **Schools as Support Structures**

Schools are support structures for nations. Not only do they educate, they are a micro-economy unto themselves – from transport services to bookshops, to printers and publishers, to laboratory and media equipment, to coffeehouses and canteens and restaurants and fast-food chains; school closures affect all of these.

Schools also allow a fighting chance for all to have equal economic opportunities in the future. They can also be spaces where gender discrimination can be reduced, especially with programmes that encourage the enrolment of girls since female students are the ones that often stop or postpone their education to go out to work to support families. This will happen if the economic situation worsens and we see years of work in reducing the gender gap in education being slowly dismantled.

Ultimately, educational institutions get the next generation of labour ready. A trained labour force powers economies; accelerates their growth and development. Even a short period of closure can have implications on the economic security of nations.

### **Preparing Educational Institutions**

The experience of countries that have had to shut down schools should bring to our attention the need to include them in pandemic preparedness. Countries like Sweden and Australia have kept their schools open.

Increased precautionary measures, and here Singapore schools stand out as an excellent example: staggering breaks, temperature monitoring, reminders to wash their hands, cancelling mass assemblies, after-school activities and inter school competitions, have all made schools one of the safer places to be in. But Singapore too has recently had to shut schools for a month.

A global health crisis like COVID-19 is a classic non-traditional security challenge. True to the latter's definition, it has involved large populations and has traversed across state boundaries requiring an 'all-of-society' approach to overcome.

That translates into many actors at many levels of governance stepping up coordination and cooperation. But if we are to learn anything from this pandemic it is that the lines of communication between those that need and those that give should be open and clear.

### **Learning in Uncharted Times**

Investments in education in the Global South henceforth may have to take a different form from just building infrastructure and feeding programmes. If anything, this pandemic has taught us the importance of bridging digital divides and increasing connectivity in countries that lag behind now.

Such infrastructure can help students to continue to learn even in the event of serious disruptions. Humanitarian assistance may also include educational technology or infrastructure that can be brought in. This together with other strategies must help delay school closures for as long as possible in crises situations.

Prolonged forced absence from educational institutions is a dangerous path to be on for any country. Schools serve social and economic functions. As the global economy tries to fix itself in the aftermath of this pandemic, it will need the skills and training of a prepared workforce ready to move in. Will we see this happen? The answer lies in what we do today to try and keep our students learning in uncharted times.

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