

# Children during COVID-19 : How were they impacted by school closures and what we can learn for the future?

*A Research summary  
by and for young people*



**THE ALLIANCE**  
FOR CHILD PROTECTION  
IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION



**Inter-agency Network for  
Education in Emergencies**



# BACKGROUND

**On March 11, 2020**  
World Health Organisation  
(WHO) declared COVID-19 a  
global pandemic

**1.6 billion learners**  
across **169 countries**  
were impacted by  
school closures<sup>1</sup>

**1.3 billion learners**  
had no internet connec-  
tion at home and no  
devices to learn on<sup>2</sup>



## Research Goal

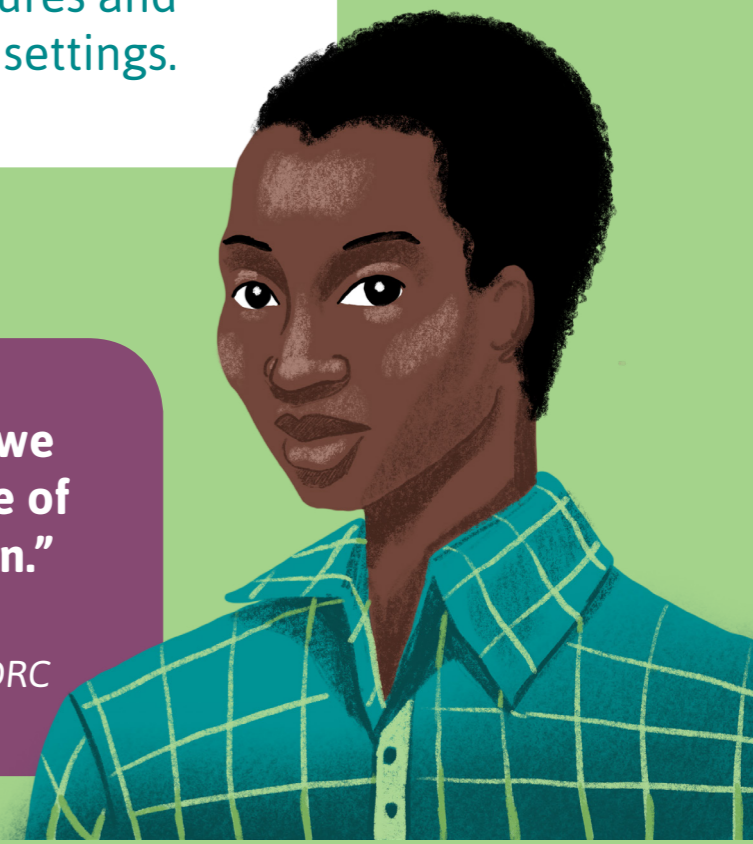
To understand how children's protection, well-being, and education was impacted by COVID-19 school closures.

## Purpose

To ensure that children's views, experiences, and well-being are at the centre of decision making for/on infectious disease outbreak related school closures and re-openings in humanitarian settings.

**"During school closures, we found ourselves in a state of frustration and stagnation."**

*Male secondary student in the DRC*



1 - UNESCO, "Education: From disruption to recovery," accessed on 24 April 2022.

2 - United Nations Children's Fund and International Telecommunication Union (2020), "How Many Children and Young People have Internet Access at Home? Estimating digital connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic," UNICEF, New York, accessed 5 June 2022.

# METHODOLOGY

## With whom ?

Primary and Secondary School Students and Out of school Children ages 10 to 17 years, families and communities.

## From where ?

Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Lebanon

## What did we want to know ?

How have COVID-19 school closures and reopenings impacted children's education, protection and wellbeing ?

### **Infectious Disease Outbreak ( IDO) :**

*When a disease affects many people in a community or an area.*

### **Pandemic :**

*When an Infectious Disease Outbreak spreads to several countries or continents.*

## Research Methods

### **Workshops and Interviews**

Primary school, secondary school, and Out-of-School children

### **Interviews**

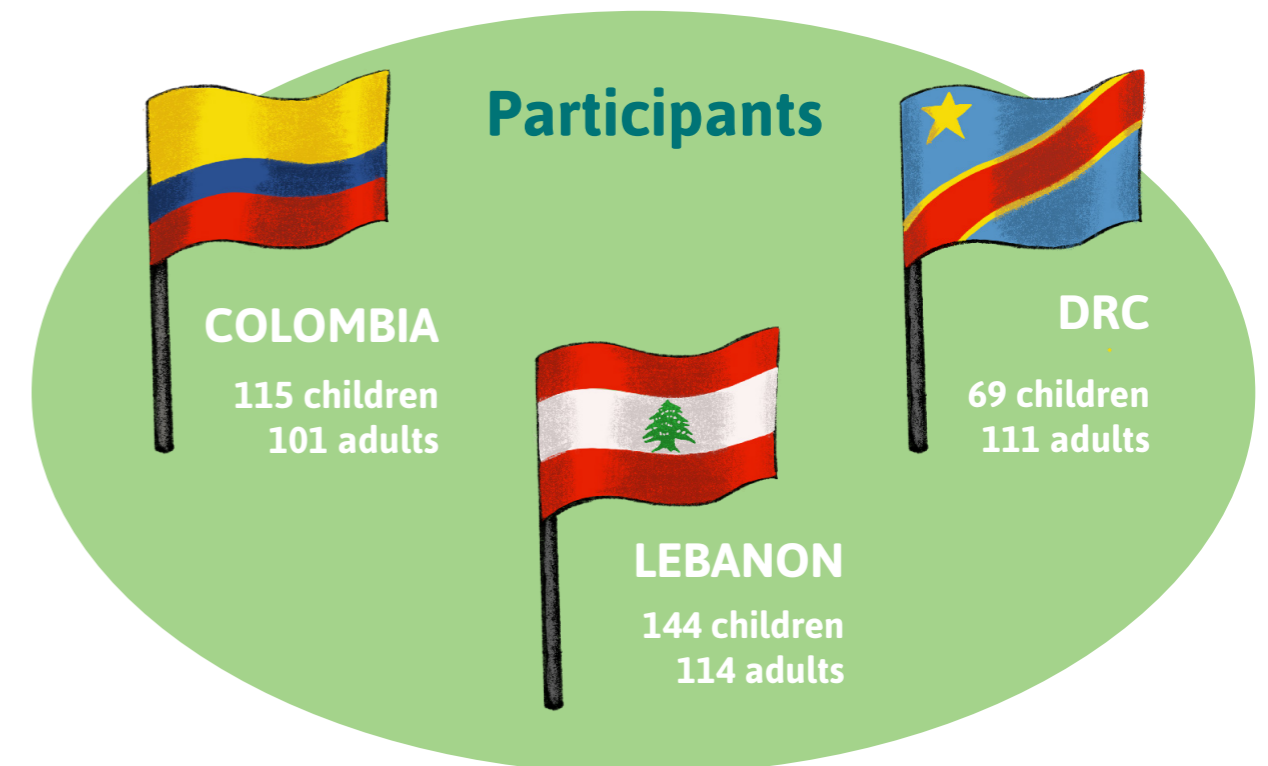
Education, child protection and social service workers

### **Group discussions**

Caregivers, educators, and social service workers

### **Survey**

Children, parents, educators, and social service workers



# WHAT WE FOUND OUT

## CHALLENGES



### *Learning*

- Very few children could access remote learning
- Some children dropped out of school or did not return when schools opened
- Self-guided learning caused stress
- Many children lost hope in learning

## STRATEGIES

Children :

- Adapting to new learning methods
- Showing courage by standing up for children's rights to education
- Helping siblings to learn

Others :

- Teachers giving one-on-one support to students, learning technology and finding ways to communicate



### *Keeping children safe*

There was an increase in :

- Abuse, exploitation, violence and neglect
- Mental health issues such as more anxiety and stress
- Children being recruited into armed groups
- Child labour
- Adolescent pregnancy and early marriage

Children :

- Showing bravery to leave dangerous situations (such as armed groups)
- Showing strength through helping others and seeking support
- Looking for safer work
- Becoming more aware of mental health

## CHALLENGES



- Communities became less safe
- Communities were less able to support children
- Families struggled to meet children's needs at home
- Loss of spaces for play and recreation
- Teachers struggled with their wellbeing
- Accessing social services and workers became difficult for children and families

### *Community*

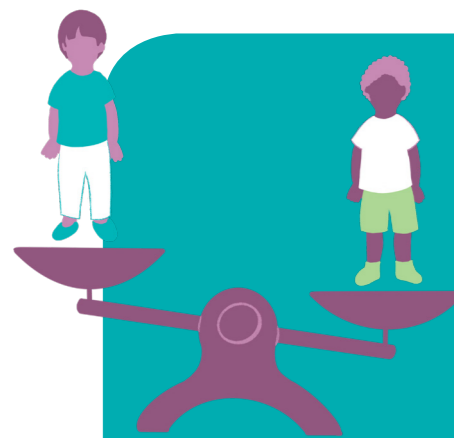
## STRATEGIES

Children :

- Following COVID-19 protocols
- Sharing advice, food, and clothes with friends and neighbours
- Helping in the home, helping the elderly
- Spending more time with family
- Practicing religion
- Contacting friends in safe ways

Others :

- Parents creating a playful environment at home



Vulnerable groups became more vulnerable :

- Children with disabilities
- Refugee and internally displaced children
- Indigenous children
- Children living in informal settlements, borderlands, or rural areas

### *Inequalities*

Children :

- Promoting unity, solidarity, and fighting racism and prejudice

Others :

- Teachers identifying and supporting the most vulnerable students
- Teachers providing support for special education and inclusive education

## STORIES FROM CHILDREN

« For some... we would go [to school] even if it was difficult. But when COVID came along, it damaged a lot. My friends who were studying dropped out of school. The others found it difficult to continue with their commercial activities so then they joined the armed forces and groups.

I lead a very difficult life. I was in charge of a small business, but it did not work. And when the pandemic persisted, I thought it was good to go and look for a job in the armed group. But when I arrived there, life was difficult for me and I wasn't able to control it, so then I left and went back home to my family. »

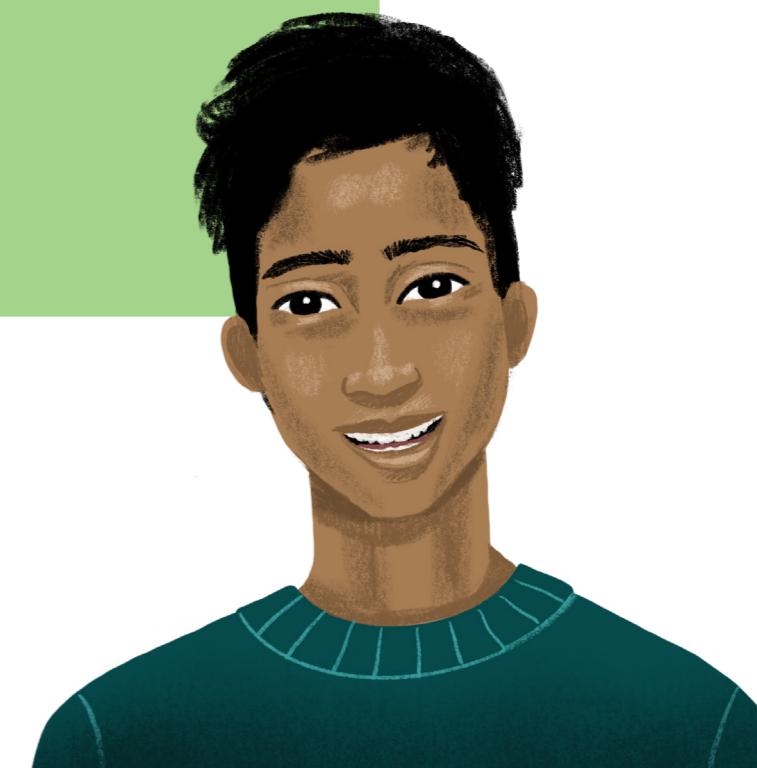
*17-year-old out of school girl in the DRC*





« ... as a result of the pandemic, one becomes very isolated. The feeling of loneliness makes one isolate oneself and not go to anyone. But ... the pandemic made us start to create stronger bonds or ties with the people we have close to us. »

*Secondary school boy in Bogotá, Colombia*



« I laugh, and the stress goes down. »

*Boy in Bogotá, Colombia*



**« From staying at home, the person feels psychological pressure, to the point where they feel that they are on the verge of exploding. »**

*Secondary student in Lebanon*

**« During the school closures, we found ourselves in a state of madness. We raised ourselves and going back to school was expensive. »**

*Secondary student in Lebanon*

**« I was only a student at school. Now I am working and my entire life has changed. »**

*Out of school child in Lebanon*





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## GOVERNMENTS



- Engage with communities, children and parents in preparing and responding to an Infectious Disease Outbreak, including developing and carrying out emergency response plans
- Train local service workers and share material and good practices
- Fund social protection programmes and school feedings programmes

## COMMUNITIES



- Support income generation for families and provide resources for parents
- Work together with organisations of different sizes, religions, and ethnic/racial groups, including after-school clubs, community groups and child-led groups, to strengthen child well-being
- Engage with children and families to understand their needs and support

## SCHOOLS



- Develop Infectious Disease Outbreak «emergency response committees» in schools
- Work with children and families to determine the best ways for children to learn during an Infectious Disease Outbreak
- If schools need to close, link students with social support services; identify students who are most vulnerable
- Advocate for their needs and provide support

## CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



- Learn from what children, families, and communities have done to enhance well-being during an Infectious Disease Outbreak and build on these strategies
- Engage children's clubs and groups to advocate for children's education and protection needs during an Infectious Disease Outbreak
- Advocate for children to be central to developing and carrying out emergency response plans

**« There is a danger that the children will remain without an education and we are worried about their future and what will happen to them. »**

*Father in Lebanon*

**« I went with my father to work, but did not quit school ! »**

*Young Syrian boy in Lebanon*

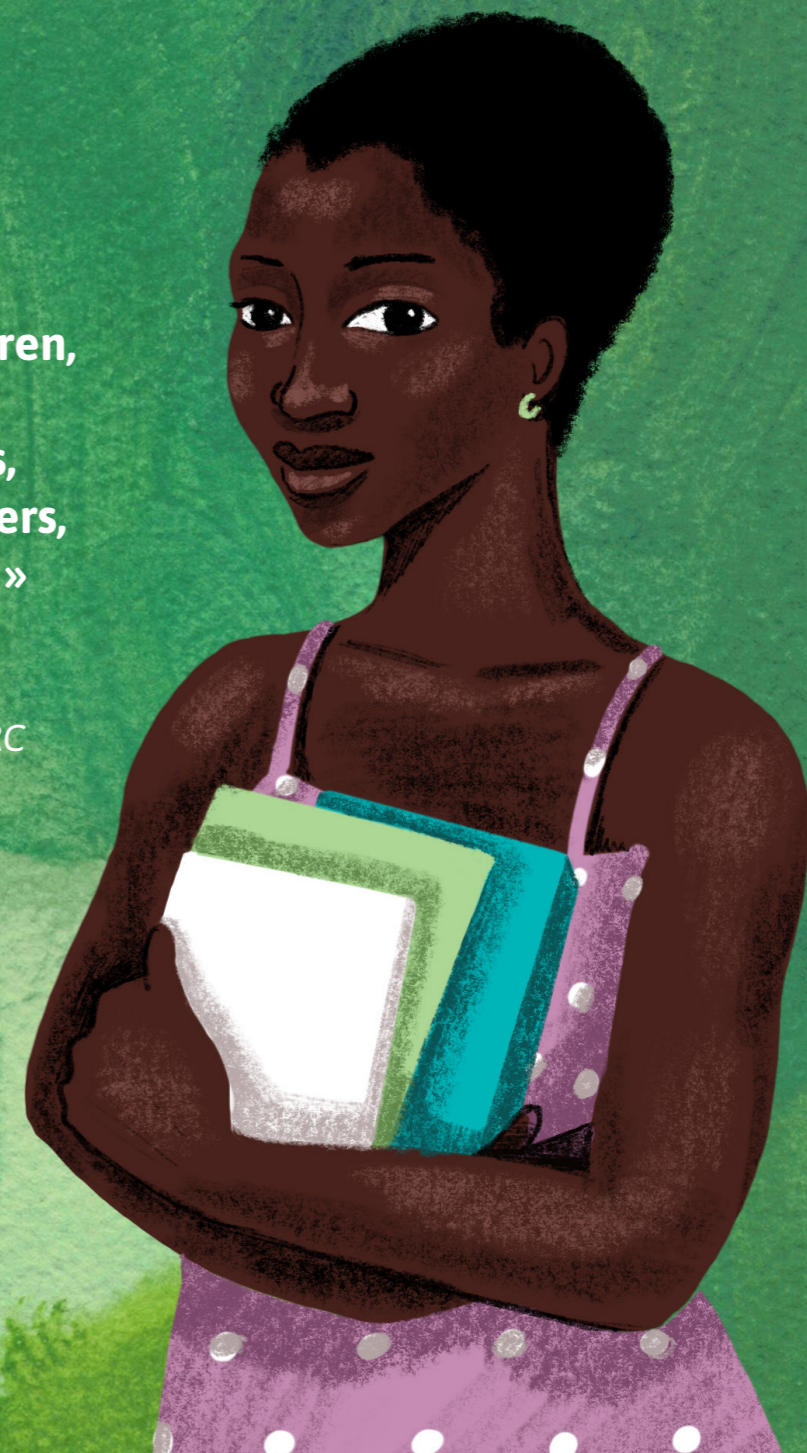


**« [People] felt the need to do things and did not let the children be children. »**

*Teacher in Colombia*

**« For us children, our strength is our parents, the big brothers, the teachers. »**

*Secondary student in the DRC*



# KEY MESSAGES ...

## ... FOR GOVERNMENTS



### Decision-making around closing schools

- Schools must NOT be closed. There are ways to keep schools open and safe during infectious outbreaks. For example, by limiting class sizes, adding more classrooms, providing clean water and soap, and adapting technologically and socially.
- Children must be involved in making decisions around school closures.

### Address impacts from COVID-19 school closures by creating an enabling environment where children and families can thrive

- Support children who suffered challenges during COVID-19 school closures to return to school.
- A child's place is at school and at home, NOT in war. Strengthen measures to protect children from being recruited by armed groups and support children to safely leave armed groups and to return to school.
- Support girls who were married and pregnant during COVID 19, ensuring their access to education and vocational training
- Provide income-generation and employment opportunities for low-income parents.
- Ensure that children are not involved in hazardous child labour and are able to attend school.

# KEY MESSAGES

## ... FOR GOVERNMENTS



### Reducing inequalities

- Increase funding for education.
- Invest in new technology such as tablets and laptops with adequate internet and radio connection to improve accessibility and continuity of education.
- Provide and regulate no-cost opportunities for students to receive additional support by educators outside of school hours, as needed.
- Reduce education and social inequality gaps, for example by sharing educational materials and expanding opportunities to all.
- Create supportive and enabling learning environments for children with disabilities.
- Identify refugee children who are Out-of-School and ensure that they receive education too.

## ... FOR FAMILIES, SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES



### Create an enabling environment where we can thrive and learn in the following ways :

- Strengthen the culture of care for children. Use strategies that are not based on punishment, and create safe, dynamic, and healthy environments for children, in the home and in the community (families, schools and communities).
- Provide learning spaces in communal areas where communities can safely come together to support children in their education. (i.e. schools and communities)
- Provide opportunities for parents and caregivers to support their children's learning, for example, by allowing parents to attend class sessions with their children. (schools and communities)
- Always consider what is best for children and respect children's rights. (families, schools and communities)

# ACTIONS

## Examples of what we have done to take care of ourselves and others, during and because of school closures :

During COVID-19 school closures :

- We followed public health guidelines by staying at home, wearing masks, social distancing and getting vaccinations. We encouraged other children in our communities to do the same.
- We helped low-income parents with income-generating work. We will continue to do this, as long as we can still go to school and do our homework.
- Older children taught and assisted the little children.
- We learned to be self-directed and made use of the internet

- Due to COVID-19, we are more aware of the need for self-care and want to increase our knowledge of mental health in our daily lives. It is also important to accompany people with mental health problems, especially anxiety and depression.

- We encourage out-of-school children to return to school.

- We are sharing our experiences and reflections on COVID-19 school closures to advocate for the inclusion of children in government decisions around school closures during outbreaks – for us and future generations.

- We support children who were recruited to armed groups to return to their families and school.

- We support girls who were married and pregnant during the pandemic – to ensure they have access to school or vocational training (i.e. sewing, braiding hair).



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