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we
World

Coping with multiple crises Impact of the COVID-19 and financial hardships on education in Akkar and Bekaa



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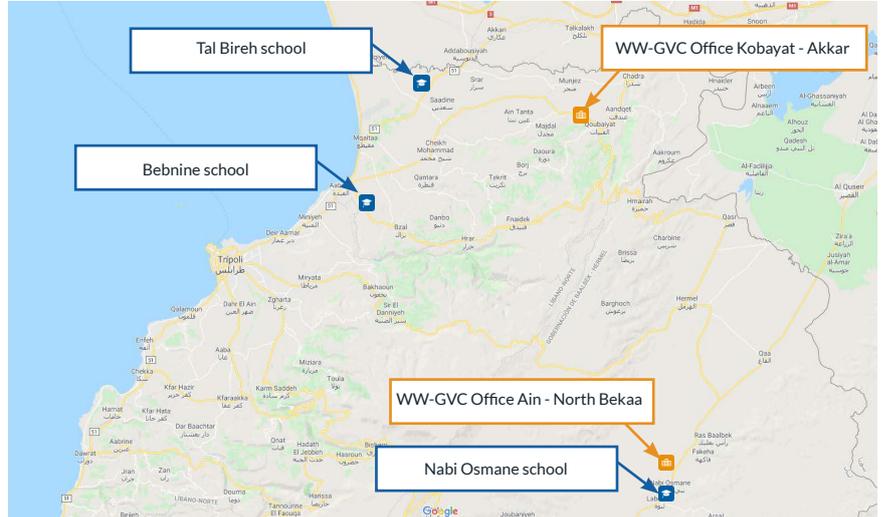
Introduction

In an attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Lebanon has announced the closure of all schools and universities on February 28, two weeks before the nation-wide lockdown in place since March 15th, 2020.

The COVID-19 crisis is aggravating the impact of a deepening economic crisis, affecting especially the most vulnerable families. This economic crisis led to months-long nationwide protests from October 2019, blocking roads and preventing children to go to schools for days. Several interruptions in learning coupled with exacerbated inequalities disrupt the lives of children, their parents and teachers and might have long-term consequences on their living conditions and economic opportunities.

To mitigate the impacts of the multiple crises and to ensure continued access to quality and inclusive education, We World - GVC conducted four needs assessment surveys aiming at understanding the socio-economic needs and concerns; and at monitoring the progress of remote learning programs from a community perspective. Surveys were conducted in Tal Bireh and Bebnine (in Akkar Governorate) and Nabi Osmane (Baalbek - Hermel Governorate).

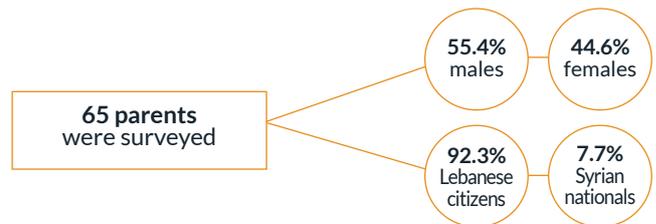
Map 1. Location of the schools surveyed and WW-GVC offices in the field



Methodology

We World - GVC conducted 82 phone interviews on the 3rd, 4th and 6th of April 2020 in three cities where the SCALE - Social Cohesion through Accessible Learning Environments project, financed by AICS, is currently being implemented: in Bebnine and Tal Bireh in Akkar, Nabi Osmane in North Bekaa.

65 parents were surveyed. The sampling was random and stratified based on the proportionality of students in the schools: the team reached the number of heads of household (HoH) assigned to each area. 55.4% of the parents are males and 44.6% are females, and 92.3% are Lebanese citizens whereas 7.7% are Syrian nationals



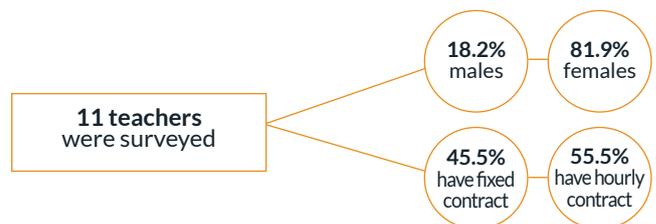
The majority (38.5%) of parents have five or more children and the minority (3%) have only one child. 24.6% have four children, 18.5% have three and 15.4% have two children.

The majority of the children are aged between 6 and 12 with 90.8% of the parents having one or more children in that age range. 61.5% of parents have one or more children aged between 13 and 18 and 46.2% have children less than five years old.

The surveys were geographically divided as following while respecting the proportionality of the students in the areas:

- Bebnine: 53.9%
- Tal Bireh: 24.6%
- Nabi Osmane: 21.5%

11 teachers were surveyed. A sample of all the teachers was taken while respecting a proportional representation of gender, type of contract, and number of teachers in each school. They are all Lebanese and the majority of them are females (81.8%).



The surveys were geographically divided as following:

- Bebnine public school for girls: 4
- Nabi Osmane intermediate public school: 4
- Tal Bireh mixed public school: 3

The three **school directors** and the **local authorities'** representatives of the cities where the project operates were surveyed: the Mayor of Tal Bireh, the Vice Mayor of Bebnine and the secretary of Nabi Osmane.

Main findings

The lockdown has worsened the already widespread poverty

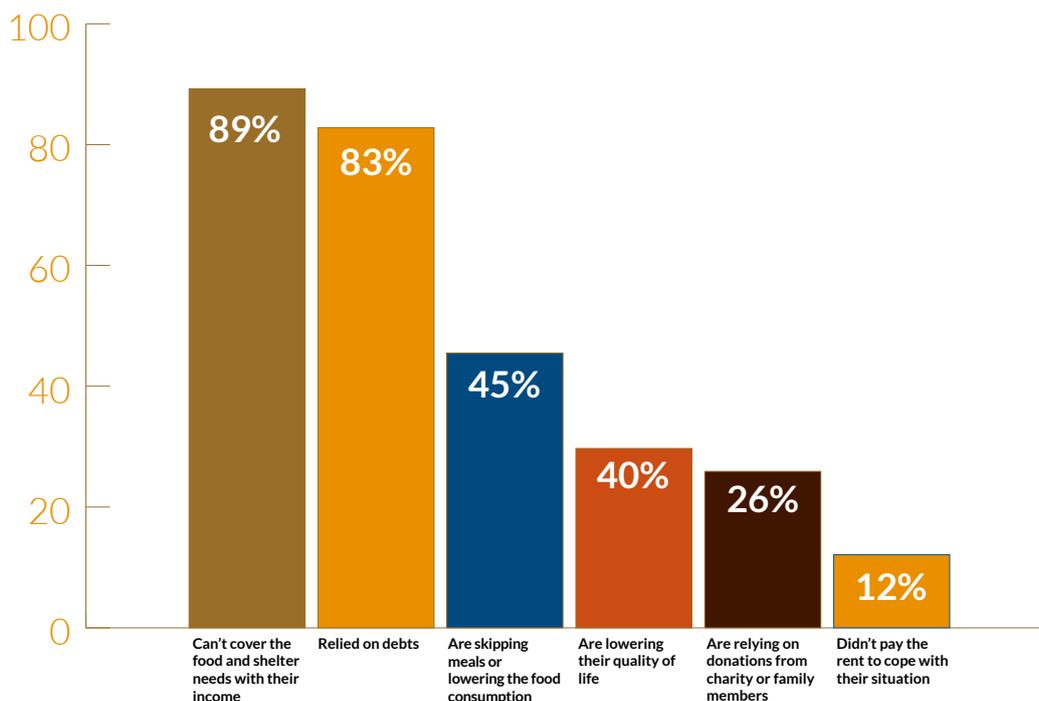
All-but-one respondents of the HoH (98.46%) reported that their incomes decreased over the past six months. Soaring inflation and increased prices of basic commodities, devaluation of the currency and high exchange rates as well as reduced livelihood opportunities were already prevailing in the country, before the outbreak. Previous vulnerability assessments conducted by We World - GVC show that the levels of income were already low in Akkar and Bekaa, both being deprived areas in Lebanon. The majority of the households reported earning less than 500,000 LBP per month (33.8% earning less than 300,00 LBP, and 35.4% earning between 301,000 and 500,000 LBP).

However, the multiple economic, financial and medical crises pushed up unemployment rates and left households reeling. Unemployment increased with 70.8% of HoH not having any member who has an occupation that secures income today (compared to 15.4% six months ago), 21.5% of HoH who have some of the adults working today and generating income (compared to 55.4% six months ago), and 7.7% of HoH who have all the adults generating income (compared to 29.2% six months ago).

Financial difficulties and shortage in access to basic needs were reported to be a specific consequence of the pandemic by respectively 57% and 38.5% of the respondents.

The loss of purchasing power is having adverse consequences on respondents that have to resort to negative coping mechanisms to pull through the difficult economic time as shown in chart 1. Though not explicitly reported by the respondents, the number of children engaged in child labour could also increase significantly to cope with the loss of income.

Chart 1. Negative coping strategies

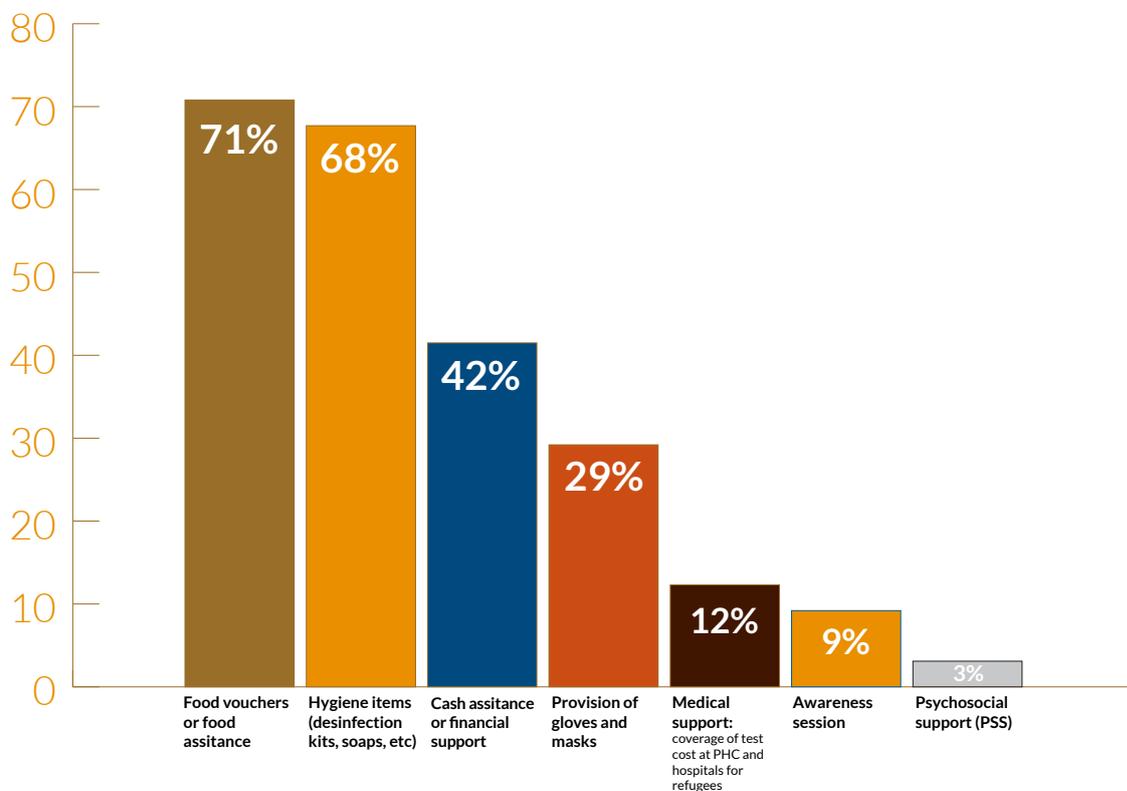


Risk of losing jobs and measures being taken to slow the spread of the virus are also causing mental distress: 80% of the respondents reported increased panic, stress and depression. 76.9% of respondents were affected by the cessation of work and 72.3% were affected by the disruption of schools. Some people were affected by the limitation of their social gatherings and activities (18.5%), and their children were becoming bored, afraid and aggressive (24.6%). Only a small minority (3.1%) indicated using increased and improved hygiene practices.

The economic situation is also affecting teachers. Schools directors stated that some of the wages of teachers have declined or been delayed due to a decreased number of working hours for contractual teachers. This is even more problematic knowing that the teachers might have to spend more on equipment required to conduct classes remotely (increase their Internet package and buy a new laptop or tablet). 63.64% of the teachers are facing economic challenges during COVID-19 crisis. Among those, 57.1% reported resorting to debts and 28.5% were not meeting some of their needs to cope with the situation.

Households in Tal Bireh, Bebnine and Nabi Osmane are increasingly vulnerable and unable to meet their basic needs. They expressed the provision of the services highlighted in chart 2 as pressing needs to overcome the situation.

Chart 2. Pressing needs to overcome the situation



The representatives of the local authorities specifically stressed the need to provide in-kind assistance for those poor families who were obliged to close their business and those who have no income. The Secretary of Nabi Osmane stated that the number of families below the poverty line went from 100 to 700 families due to the COVID-19 outbreak. In Bebnine, the number of poor families reaches 4,000 according to the Vice-Mayor.

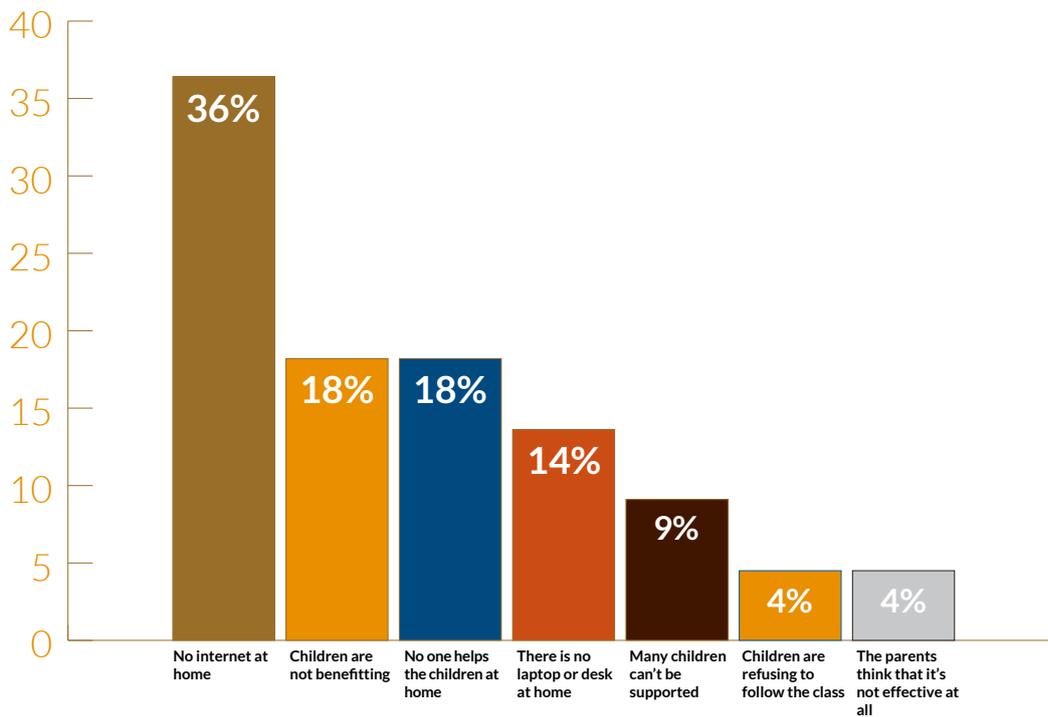
There is a risk to amplify the inequalities of opportunities

When asked about the parents' plan for pedagogical continuity of their children, the majority of them (49.2%) didn't know what to do and didn't have any plan. For students who do not have a desk, internet connection, laptop or supportive and literate parents, remote learning runs the risk of widening the gap within the segments of the society.

Only 66.2% of households declared that their children enrolled in school are receiving formal education at home, which means that **33.8% households' kids are dropping-out and missing out on learning**. The parents reported that the main reason (59.1%) is because schools are not providing formal online education. This is echoed by the school directors of Tal Bireh and Bebnine who stated that no e-learning is being implemented in their schools.

The other barriers to education, as reported by the parents, are highlighted in chart 3.

Chart 3. Barriers to education



Barriers to technology and internet that low-income students face are hurdles to equal and quality education

Only **64.6% of the respondents have internet at home**; sometimes sharing it with the neighbours (38.1%) or using their personal mobile data (35.7%). One household is relying on the 500 MBs exceptionally provided in March by the government due to the lockdown and the members of the household do not know how they will manage in April.

Among the respondents who have access to an Internet connection, almost a quarter (23.8%) considered it of a bad or very bad quality. In addition to the daily power cuts, the poor internet connection hinders the efficiency of the learning, making it difficult to download the lesson or to have online conversations with the teachers.

Almost half (50.8%) of the respondents lack access to the tools and internal capacity for their children to learn from home. Internet is the most reported tool missing reported by 81.8% of respondents who lack access to the tools and internal capacity for remote learning. Other tools, despite being addressed by the parents in previous questions, were again reported lacking.

Table 1. Resources needed reported by the parents

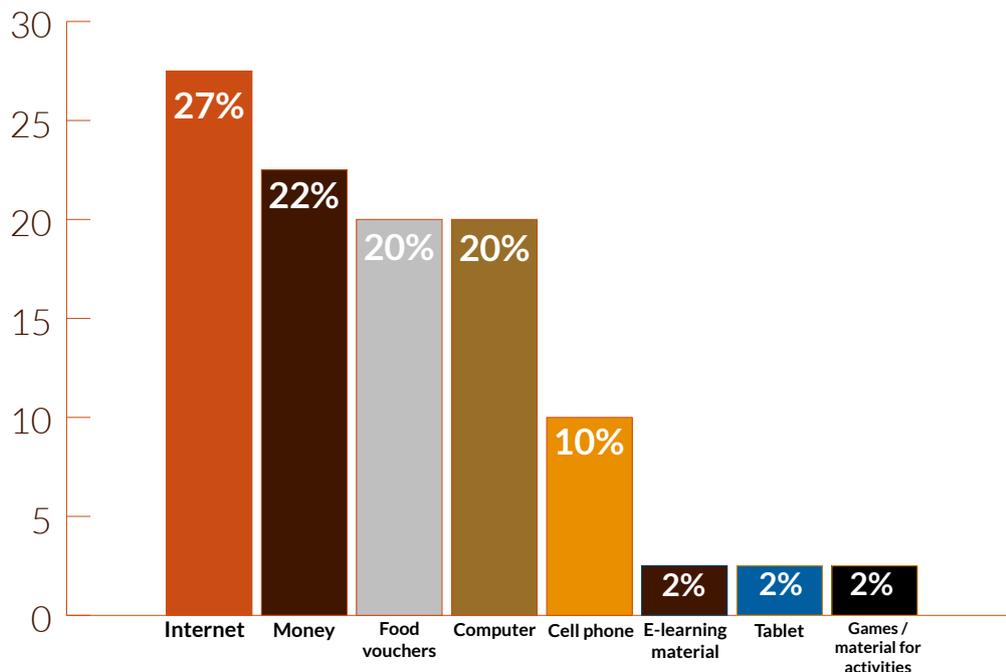
Resource needed	Percentage
Phone	45.5%
PC or laptop	42.4%
Not enough cell phones available for all the children enrolled in e-learning from home	30.3%
TV which hinders their access to the classes provided by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) to pupils who have official exams:	21.2%
Tablet	15.2%
Stationary (paper, pen, books)	12.1%
Not enough TVs: more than one child in the household who have official exams	6.1%
Not enough physical space at home	6%
Everything due to poor living conditions	3%
Phone that support WhatsApp application	3%
Not enough tablets available for the children, when there are several children in the household attending different grades	3%

Technology alone does not always represent quality in learning.

Even when the children can access lessons remotely, **all the teachers surveyed perceived them as ineffective**, because of a lack of motivation from the children: 45.5%, lack of maturity of children to follow online classes: 18.2%, lack of parents' capacities to help and support the learning: 9.1%.

In order to monitor the assiduity and continuity of education, most of the teachers interact frequently with the students (54.5%) to discuss the daily lessons, homework and assist the students' either using e-learning or answering their questions. 18.2% of the teachers reported that they never interacted with their students.

Chart 4. Pressing needs to carry out e-learning



Half of the parents (47.7%) reported that they are in contact with their children's teachers, mainly to discuss the modality of remote learning and its effectiveness, homework, explanations on the sessions and on how to assist their children and how to communicate with them.

63.1% of the parents are currently facing difficulties with their children: 48.8% reported that their children are bored while 24.4% reported that the children are getting aggressive and are having behavioural change. 19% of the parents reported that their children are facing difficulties in learning, 17.1% of the children are anxious, 14.6% want to go outside, and 14.6% are living in lower quality of life due to difficult financial resources.

Parents of children with special needs reported the same range of needs, with a special emphasis on the necessity of continuity of care and improved access to medicines for the pathology according to a survey conducted in Nabi Osmane by the Lebanese Union for People with Physical Disabilities (LUPD) in April 2020: 85 % of respondents needed food, 79.4 % sterilizers and 23 % medicines. Remote learning requires a lot from parents who have to ensure that their children have the tools and equipment they need and to help them stay on task and complete the assignments with limited or no contact with the teachers. 61.5% of the parents in Tal Bireh, Bebnine and Nabi Osmane are in need of support to do so. They expressed the provision of the services highlighted in chart 4 as pressing needs to overcome the situation.

There is a need to support the response at the local level

Only 61.5% of the households stated that they received awareness sessions or Information, education and communication (IEC) materials on the COVID-19 topic, among them 62.5% reported that it was through the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), and 35% received it through the television. All of those who received awareness sessions did so remotely: through SMS, WhatsApp or the television. None of the people who attended the awareness session reported that they were provided by NGOs, INGOs, or any UN agency. **Almost the whole (98.5%) population reported that they didn't receive any material to prevent COVID-19** and only one household reported having received disinfection kits and soap from their family and neighbours; highlighting a gap in the coverage of prevention services.

Both school's directors and representatives of the local authorities stressed that they relied on their own capacities and finances. In regards to the prevention measures, the directors comply with MEHE instructions broadcast on the national news, they also receive generic awareness SMS from the MoPH. When it comes to the prevention measures before the closure of the schools, Tal Bireh and Bebnine schools relied on MEHE instructions and support: MEHE implemented a partial sterilization and fumigation programme. In Nabi Osmane, no measure was implemented in the school which was the only one not to receive brochures and flyers with proper instructions. However, they were advised by MEHE on increasing hygiene practices, increasing hand washing, and wearing protective equipment such as masks and gloves. Tal Bireh school director mentioned that they've used a thermometer to measure children temperature and that they would have reported on any suspicious case. While Bebnine school principal sent a report on a daily basis to MEHE and he mentioned receiving very few prevention equipment from UNICEF.

The directors stressed their concerns about the school's financial ability to buy enough protective aid, sanitization equipment, and medical preparation in case of emergencies to ensure the students and teachers safety when the schools reopen. They also asked for awareness raising sessions and training for the teachers on how to use the new learning methodology.

None of the three municipalities had received any type of assistance or decentralised guidance so far; but they did receive and apply the government's policies.

To organise the response at the local level, Tal Bireh and Bebnine municipalities constituted a disaster unit composed of sheikhs, doctors, members of the municipalities, local authorities and the mayor. In Tal Bireh, the disaster unit distributed masks and provided information about prevention and hygiene practices. In Bebnine, the unit identified the families who are under the poverty line, provided awareness messages through Whatsapp and megaphones and sterilized the area. Both municipalities have contingency plans and are depending on their own municipal capacities.

The situation in Nabi Osmane is unique as there is no municipality. A disaster council has been established in coordination with the Governor who is responsible for the response. A focal point visited Nabi Osmane to check available spaces for quarantine. Municipalities expressed their concern of not being able to apply the contingency plan because of the economic crisis and deterioration of the country's economy.

Conclusion and recommendations

Households finances are being strained and needs are increasing because of the multiple crises. **96.9% of parents reported that over the past six months their quality of life decreased** whereas only 3.1% reported that they remained the same. No one reported that their lifestyle and quality of life got better.

Continuity of education is a great challenge in times of economic and medical crises. **There are real risks of regression for deprived children who already faced difficulties and whose access to technology and supportive learning environment is limited.** This is all the more prominent in already vulnerable areas such as Tall Bire, Bebnine and Nabi Osmane, suffering from interrelated set of economic and social problems.

36.9% of the parents reported needing distance support to help their children overcome the lockdown and pursue their education. The needs identified are the following:

- Distance learning support such as videos, pictures, laptop, adequate internet connection: 87%
- Psycho-social support for parents and children: 43.5%
- Recreational material support: 39.1%

For the most vulnerable children, dropping out of schools is also exposing them to health and well-being risks. Attending school is not only about learning to read or math but it's also about social interactions and developing social skills. The role of parents, family and teachers in children education is critical to ensure they are developing their socio-emotional skills. Community engagement is key to leave no one behind and to bring a positive change in behaviour towards continued education and increased hygiene practices.

To mitigate the exacerbation of poverty and inequalities and to avoid long-lasting consequences for children's health and educational outcomes, we recommend INGOs, NGOs and UN agencies:

- In line with the Ministry of Social Affairs cash assistance distribution of 400,000 LL that recently started, to rapidly assess options available and consult with municipalities to determine the most feasible sets of solutions, including cash transfer, cash for work, income support to mitigate the consequences of unemployment and prevent the broadening of child poverty; and support in applying municipal contingency plan;
- To scale-up resources and pooling of logistics capacities to safely distribute food baskets that include food of high nutritional value prioritizing purchases from local and smallholder producers; alternately to consider food vouchers useable in local supermarkets or increased cash transfers.

To ensure a safe supportive learning environment, we recommend the Education Working Group and related INGOs, NGOs:

- To scale-up funding to provide vulnerable families with the necessary equipment to fulfill distance learning needs, starting with enhanced internet connection or pre-paid data sim cards and laptops/tablets. Specific support for children with special needs about the accessibility feature for devices and operating systems must be provided;
- Along with distribution of hygiene items such as soaps, detergent, bleach, to provide awareness-raising sessions that include accurate accessible information and facts about the outbreak and to integrate mental health and psycho-social considerations, targeting the most vulnerable households;
- To support parents and caregivers with suggestions of recreational and learning activities on positive parenting to help the kids learn within a caring environment during the lockdown, this could include game-based activities to revise schoolwork and to explain how to deal with the virus (hand washing games, creative games to express and process difficult emotions, etc.).

To ensure that distance education is integrated as an essential component of the overall education system, we recommend the Education Working group:

- To request MEHE to monitor closely the continuity of education school by school in liaison with teachers and school directors. In collaboration with local authorities, official statistics disaggregated by gender of dropped-out children must be produced to better identify gaps and needs, with a special effort put in the identification of children who are at risk or are victims of violence, abuse, and exploitation;
- To advocate to MEHE to provide teachers with higher compensation during those times; and to provide them with the basic tools to operate the platforms (internet, laptop) in collaboration with the directors of the schools;

- Recognizing the uncertainty on the duration of school closures, to support schools and municipalities in their contingency plans for when reopening occurs to offset disruption of education and to support those that could have been left behind. This includes provision of protective aid, sanitization equipment for teachers and children, improved access to gender-sensitive latrines, revision and adaptation of the curricula, agreement on specific distancing measures, etc.



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