



LEBANON

**EDUCATION IN CRISIS:
RAISING THE ALARM**

March 2021

Education in Crisis

At least **1.2 million children across Lebanon** have had their education disrupted for more than one year, with many having last attended school in October 2019, following protests and civil unrest. This is impacting Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian children alike. With the country slipping deeper into an economic crisis, a safe and systematic school reopening in Lebanon is difficult to imagine. Even before this, children across the country already had lower than average literacy and numeracy rates in the Middle East region.

The longer children are out of school, the further their learning outcomes will drop, and the greater the potential for an increase in incidents of child labour and child marriage, among other protection concerns. The limited data on school enrolment, retention, and current access to learning across Lebanon is limiting any ability to plan and effectively deliver education interventions.¹

It is vital that **schools open as soon as it is safe to do so**, and that **all children are able to access education** regardless of their background or gender. There should also be an increased investment in appropriate data collection on children's learning in Lebanon and strengthened coordination in the education sector to respond to the education crisis without delay.



¹ Limited access to data on education is limiting the education sector's ability to plan and respond to the education crisis. This includes a lack of data on the total number of children enrolled in different schools, enrolment data by nationality, drop-out rates or failure to enrol, and the number of school days children are actually attending, including for remote learning.

Keeping Learning Alive



4-year old Hala* suffers from language delay. Her mother said:

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If it weren't for my constant talks with her [Hala*] in the previous year about school, I'm not sure she would have understood the concept. With the lockdowns and economic situation, **Hala* rarely leaves the house, which is not good for her mental and speech therapy progress.** With no schools to interact with children her own age or play-parks, I was very worried about her.”

Upon enrolling Hala* in a community-based early childhood education run by Save the Children

and supported by Education Cannot Wait (ECW), Hala* was able to continue some form of education. Her mother said;

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Even though there are lockdowns due to the COVID-19 crisis, **the centre kept on providing online education classes and activities which truly encouraged me to enrol my daughter.** My daughter interacts with them mainly via phone and met a few times with her teacher. Online classes are hard but I try my best to ensure she benefits from everything. After her class I would repeat the lessons for her. Though the mobile internet is getting a bit expensive... **I worry we might not be able to enrol Hala* in school next year.** Due to the crises in this country, my husband's work has been on and off for the past year. We're scraping by.”

Economic Crisis

Lebanon is experiencing a devastating economic crisis, with an estimated **50% of Lebanese, 70% of Palestinians, and over 90% of Syrians living in poverty and increasingly food insecure.**² This poses one of the most significant challenges to children's return to school. In 2019, many children missed out on learning as teachers went on multiple strikes over delayed salary payments.

The lack of resources to pay teachers' salaries has exacerbated the lack of access to education for some of the most vulnerable children. **Public school teachers are paid in Lebanese Lira, which has lost an estimated 90% of its value making a teachers' salary now worth between 1 and 2 USD an hour.**³ This has resulted in frequent teacher strikes, primarily affecting the second shift schools where teachers are continuing their work day following the first shift.

The increased cost of financing education for families is preventing many children from returning to school. As private school tuition is fast becoming unaffordable for many families, the number of children attending public school is set to continue increasing; adding pressure on the Lebanese public school system, and contributing to a reduced number of Syrian and Palestinian refugee children able to enrol in second shift classes. **Those unable to afford technology or adequate internet access for online education also**

² World Food Programme (WFP), 'Nine Out of Ten Syrian Families in Lebanon are Now Living in Extreme Poverty, UN Study Says', UN WFP, last modified 18 December 2020, <https://www.wfp.org/news/nine-out-ten-syrian-refugee-families-lebanon-are-now-living-extreme-poverty-un-study-says>; UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 'Poverty in Lebanon: Solidarity is Vital to Address the Impact of Multiple Overlapping Shocks', UN ESCWA, last modified 19 August 2020, https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/20-00268_pb15_beirut-explosion-rising-poverty-en.pdf.

³ Financial Times, 'Lebanon's Currency Plunges to New Low Fuelling Nationwide Protests', March 2021, Accessed 09/03/2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/811bc4c2-98ca-4e9a-a23e-3d3764d5e435>



excluded. The increased cost of basic school items like textbooks, stationary, and IT equipment has created an additional barrier for many families. **Without a radical re-think in educational investment we fear that close to a million children will not fully return to school this year.**

Crisis in educational attainment

Children in Lebanon are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic at an educational disadvantage.

Although the average years of schooling in Lebanon is 10.2 years, the actual number of years where children are adequately learning at school is estimated to be only 6.3 years. This is equivalent to a loss of 3.9 years of basic education.⁴ Attainment in mathematics, science, and reading proficiency is one of the lowest across the MENA region and roughly two thirds of students in Lebanon do not meet basic proficiency levels for science, reading and mathematics.⁵

The most marginalised and deprived groups of children in Lebanon are affected by inequality in education attainment. **There can be up to 4 years' difference between attainment levels, depending on a child's socio-economic status.**⁶ Refugee children face additional barriers to education, including a lack of available spaces, personal documentation and certification required to enrol, long distances/lack of transportation to school and so on. It is estimated that **nearly 45%, at least 500,000, of Syrian refugee children were out of learning all together in the 2019-20 academic year.**⁷ Many Syrian children also attend non-formal education, with no agreed way forward to transition to formal learning is currently in place.

With limited or no data available in private or public schools on attendance, enrolment, and remote learning options, it is challenging to design and implement targeted interventions to support children's needs, particularly for the most vulnerable children. **It is imperative that data on enrolment – disaggregated by gender, age, disability and socio-economic status - is regularly collected and shared to ensure all children in Lebanon, including the most marginalised, are not left behind.**

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This year, I had to make the choice between **either putting food on the table or giving my three children an education.** I had to choose food. I couldn't afford the stationary needed for all three as well as putting food on the table. It was hard to explain this for my children. They would **cry and beg to go to school** but put it simply, I just can't afford it”

Salam, mother of 3 children (ages from 11 to 13)*

Accessible Remote Learning

The compounded impact of crises has resulted in disruption in children's access to education. **In 2019-2020 alone, children are estimated to have received only 12 and 18 weeks of schooling,** out of a total of 31-33 weeks traditionally on offer in formal education. In 2020-2021, it is estimated that children in the first shift schools have received a maximum of 11 weeks of education to date, using a hybrid approach of online and in person attendance. This number is estimated to be lower in second shift schools thus far resulting in an **estimated 8% loss in lifetime learning within the year.**⁸ While online learning is on offer for first-shift schools, second shift schools rely primarily on children's physical attendance.

Access to online learning and digital infrastructure continues to be significantly challenging for many children in Lebanon. Internet accessibility is a substantial issue, with limited connectivity in many parts of Lebanon, expensive top-up cards for managing data, and persistent electricity cut-outs inhibiting access to learning. Often, teachers are not able to provide quality remote learning and many children live in households where there are no or limited access to electronic devices to learn.

⁴ World Bank (WB), 'Lebanon Human Capital Index, 2020', September 2020,

https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/hci/HCI_1pager_LBN.pdf?cid=GGH_e_hcpexternal_en_ext.

⁵ World Bank Group (WB), 'Lebanon PISA 2018', Accessed 12/02/2020,

<http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/435071580399593024/LEBANON-PISA-Brief-2018.pdf>.

⁶ WB, 'Lebanon PISA 2018', <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/435071580399593024/LEBANON-PISA-Brief-2018.pdf>.

⁷ Their World, 'Keeping Our Promise to Syria's Refugees', June 2020, Accessed 24/02/2021,

<http://s3.amazonaws.com/theirworld-site-resources/FINAL-KeepingOurPromise-Briefing-NormalRes.pdf>

⁸ Centre for Global Development, 'It's Been a Year Since Schools Started to Close Due to COVID-19', February 2021, Accessed 25/02/2021, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/its-been-year-schools-started-close-due-covid-19>

The Government of Lebanon has offered remote learning options for children, however **weak digital infrastructure and limited access to technology remains a significant barrier for many children**. To provide non-formal education, education service providers are implementing more low-tech modalities, but resources for implementing online approaches are often limited.

The economic crisis and resulting **inflation has made remote education devices less and less affordable** for many families in Lebanon.⁹ Girls are even less likely to get time for online learning where there are limited devices in the home, and remote learning tools are often not accessible for children with disabilities. Children from backgrounds where parents have limited education, or in some cases are illiterate, have limited support at home towards their remote learning. This can particularly affect children in refugee communities. **Without increased training and curriculum for online learning, and support to ensure access to devices and stable internet, online learning will have limited benefit for many children in Lebanon.**

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Some households, like mine, **only have one smartphone** that the siblings have to share but that can't be **done fairly and we can't afford** to buy another one. Sometimes my father has to take it for work and so everyone would **miss their classes.**”

*12-year-old Ghinwa**

Protect A Generation: Safe Back to School

The longer children in Lebanon are out of school, the higher the possibility that they will experience violence and exploitation, including child labour and child marriage. The increasing socio-economic pressure on families in Lebanon during the economic and COVID-19 crisis, increases this possibility. Furthermore, the increased pressure on children to support their families may lead to an increase in psychosocial distress and negative coping mechanisms.¹⁰

Distance learning in non-formal education settings has been limited and these children are some of the most at risk of not returning to education at all. Many refugee children are attending non-formal education programmes, with limited pathways to transition to formal education. For those children already out of school, guidance remains limited on ensuring they are referred to a school to support them and limited retention programmes exist when they do.

For children who have attended some form of school over the last year, they have now progressed a year in their education, and are in need of **catch-up classes of at least 6-8 weeks** according to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE). The previous academic year also saw a 50% reduction in the curriculum on offer, to try and ensure that only the essential competencies are given to students.

While this serves an important purpose to ensure students gain the primary skills they need to continue their education, this is a worrying trend for children's academic proficiency in the long-term, especially as this reduction in curriculum comes with a reduction in teacher-led learning sessions. **Combined, this could set Lebanon's education attainment even further behind, and Lebanon will not achieve the educational outcomes of its peers.**

“

In the camp I live in, it's **completely unsafe** for a girl to walk alone and since we have to go to school on foot, many girls decide to not go, out of fear... **Remote education is adding pressure on girls**, since not all are fully equipped to attend the lessons and some parents see remote education useless so girls are **forced to drop out of school, exposed to early marriage and street work.**”

*14-year-old Lama**

⁹ All materials in Lebanon are subject to the increase rate of the US Dollar in the black market. This could be at a rate of 9400 LBP to 1 USD compared to an official rate of 1500 LBP to 1 USD, for example.

¹⁰ Plan International, 'COVID-19 Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment', April 2020, <https://plan-international.org/publications/covid-19-multi-sectoral-needs-assessment>.

Recommendations

Multiple crises impacting communities across Lebanon – especially children - have resulted in a humanitarian crisis with children experiencing an acute education emergency.

- The Government and education actors in Lebanon should establish a fit-for-purpose coordination platform that addresses the urgent needs of all children impacted by the education crisis.
- Education response actors (Government, UN, NGOs, private sector) should develop a plan for education in Lebanon taking into account an evidence-based risk analysis, ensuring the meaningful engagement of children in its planning and implementation.
- Donors should sufficiently fund the rollout and implementation of appropriate interventions to ensure a safe resumption of education for all children in Lebanon.
- Donors should ensure funding of the Basic Assistance sector and diverse humanitarian cash mechanisms to prioritize scale up of cash assistance to all nationalities living in Lebanon based on clear expenditure and market data.

Save the Children calls for **a safe return to in-person schooling for all school aged children, as soon as it is safe to do so.**

The Government of Lebanon should:

- Re-assess school closures and carefully make child friendly considerations for school reopening by looking at their impact on academic, psychosocial, child protection and health dimensions.
- Protect existing budget in social welfare which targets children, in particular education, health care, and social allowances. Including a focus on equitable access to remote learning and a safe return to school.
- Implement a transparently-distributed and financially adequate social assistance package for the most vulnerable Lebanese families, which is evidence-based to cover minimum basic needs and help offset the loss of income due to the current economic crisis. Based on this and the COVID-19 emergency response, develop a universal shock-responsive social protection system to address future crises.
- Where feasible, provide universal financial assistance coverage of all children to address the increases in poverty across all income groups, and in order to mitigate life-cycle vulnerabilities faced by pregnant women, young children, and adolescents.

Education response actors should:

- Ensure proper safety measures are in place for safe returns to school including in non-formal education centres through training of staff and teachers, provision of disinfection materials, PPE kits, etc.
- Develop a comprehensive and actionable distance learning plan to complement the MEHE distance learning strategy that uses low-tech and no-tech solutions to ensure all children can continue learning, including children attending non-formal education.
- Collaborate to understand the challenges that distance learning poses to students, teachers, parents and caregivers including parents' readiness and capacity to support remote learning and the effect that has on the child's learning process.
- Prepare participatory, inclusive Safe Back to School Campaigns.
- Develop catch up classes and resources and integrate wellbeing support to provide targeted interventions ready for school reopening.
- Roll out adapted teacher professional development and wellbeing support.