



LEBANON: EDUCATION AT A TIPPING POINT

Education Sector Advocacy Brief

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“Because we dream of a better future, because we want to succeed,
we want your support to make our voices heard and our demands realised.
Be with us to create a strong and effective generation.” – Mya*

SUMMARY: CONVERGING CRISES CREATING AN EDUCATION EMERGENCY

In recent years, families in Lebanon have been buffeted by unprecedented challenges, due to the economic crisis, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, political deadlock, and the devastating explosion that shook Beirut. People of all backgrounds have been driven into deep poverty, and now find themselves unable to afford basic necessities, such as food and medicine.

These complex and interconnected issues are impacting every aspect of families’ lives - and jeopardising children’s education and futures. Many schools have been forced to close for prolonged periods since October 2019, affecting over 1.3 million children and keeping over 700,000 children out of school.¹ Even before schools shut their doors, the education system was struggling to cater for the country’s children: learning outcomes were poor with the World Bank’s 2020 Human Capital Index projecting that children born in Lebanon will reach only 52% of their potential productivity when they grow up.² The system is also marked by significant inequities, with many children from poorer families, children with disabilities or refugee children being excluded from accessing education.

Over the last two years, obstacles preventing children from accessing a quality education have been compounded - and many more have emerged. Children have consistently reported that accessing education became difficult since schools closed as they – like many children around the world – were forced to transition to online and other forms of distance learning. However, children in Lebanon faced unique challenges when this shift happened, due to the impacts of the political, economic and fuel crises.

Many children dropped out of education altogether, with some being forced to work as financial pressures on their families became overwhelming. Those who didn’t drop out of school reported that the quality of learning had significantly deteriorated. Students mainly attributed this decline to teachers struggling to effectively teach online, difficulty using the online programme or device, and an unsuitable learning environment at home. **With insufficient access to inclusive distance learning tools, students have been out of meaningful learning for almost two academic years.**³

This lost learning time has led to poorer learning outcomes for children in Lebanon, with serious implications for human capital development and economic growth.⁴ However, beyond the macro repercussions for the country’s development, there are significant protection risks for each individual child who drops out of school. Safe learning spaces and schools not only support children to achieve academic learning outcomes - they also play a critical role in children’s social, emotional and physical development, and wellbeing.

As public schools across Lebanon re-open in mid-October, there are concerns that this may not be sustained due to a lack of financial and operational resources and that many children will not be able to attend school as fuel reserves run dry and school-related costs prove unfeasible for many families. Furthermore, this does not take into account children who are not currently enrolled in the formal education system and are most affected by inequality and discrimination.

¹ Lebanon Education Sector (2021) Data on Children in Education in Lebanon for the year 2020 – 2021. Available from: <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoizTYyMzQ0MDgtZTQ2MS00MWM2LTk3M2UtNmFINWYyMjg5MzVliwidCI6Ijc3NDZEWMTk1LTE0ZTEtNGZiOC05MDRiLWFjMTg5MjAyMzY2NyIsImMiOj9>

² World Bank (2021) *Foundations for Building Forward Better: An Education Reform path for Lebanon*. Available from: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/627001624033308257/pdf/Foundations-for-Building-Forward-Better-An-Education-Reform-Path-for-Lebanon.pdf>

³ UNICEF (June 2021) *Lebanon: Children’s Future on the Line*. Available from: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Lebanon_childrens_future_on_the_line_EN.pdf.pdf

⁴ Op-Cit

The situation is now at a tipping point: urgent action must be taken to ensure that all children in Lebanon can safely return to school and have opportunities to learn. This paper seeks to summarise the barriers faced by students trying to access a quality education at this unprecedented time and the impact this has had on their learning and well-being. It also sets out the key recommendations by education partners to ensure that children can safely return to the classroom, and that those who are not currently in formal education can access flexible, community-based learning opportunities until they can transition back to the formal education system:



- **First, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) should be supported in its plans to reopen schools.** Children have overwhelmingly expressed that they want to return to schools, where they feel the quality of learning is higher, they are shielded from protection risks, and their social and emotional development is safeguarded. **Increased support from the international donor community is urgently needed to support the re-opening of public schools and minimise the economic burden on both schools and families.**
- **Secondly, the MEHE, together with education partners, should carry out a contingency planning exercise for the risk that some schools may not open or vulnerable children may not enrol in school this school year.** Lebanon's Emergency Response Plan (ERP) for education relies heavily on activities implemented in the public school setting. While this is critical, some schools may be unable to open or have insufficient capacity and resources to accommodate increased transfers from private/semi-private schools and many families will be unable to afford costs to enrol children. This will leave many children at risk of no or insufficient schooling for the third academic year in a row. **A contingency planning exercise covering both formal and non-formal education programmes is crucial in ensuring that children can access learning in every potential scenario.**
- **Finally, children currently outside the formal education system should not be neglected in efforts to resume learning.** Many of these children including children with disabilities and refugee children are the most vulnerable in society. **Civil Society Organizations should be supported to provide community-based and child-centred learning opportunities for these children to continue learning, while concurrently developing flexible, long-term pathways back into the public school system.**

Education is a fundamental right for every child. It's crucial for their learning, social inclusion and development and helps to protect them from poverty, violence, exploitation and abuse.

This right does not end in times of crisis.

BACKGROUND: EDUCATION IN LEBANON

Even before the financial downturn and COVID-19 pandemic, children in Lebanon had lower than average literacy and numeracy rates in the Middle East region.⁵ Their learning outcomes – and consequently their development, wellbeing, and futures – will continue to be negatively impacted the longer they are out of school or unable to access alternative learning opportunities.

The education system is also marred by significant inequities, with refugee children at higher risk of low attendance and school dropout. The barriers to learning for refugee children include lack of available spaces, legal obstacles to enrolment, discrimination, long distances/lack of transportation to school and language.⁶ For example, 30% of school aged Syrian refugee children have never been to school.⁷



Lebanese girls and boys from poorer backgrounds face similar challenges and have significantly lower learning outcomes than their wealthier peers. It's estimated that there can be up to four years' difference in

learning outcomes, depending on a child's socio-economic status,⁸ and only half of 18-year-olds from the lowest economic quantiles completing school.⁹

Children with disabilities were already left behind in education with very limited access to learning due to factors including non-inclusive policies, lack of reasonable accommodation, shortage of trained staff, lack of inclusive curriculum, very high fees and educational expenses for adapted equipment. The lack of updated and reliable data on disability in schools has also limited policies and programs for children with disabilities.

An estimated 40,000 refugee children are enrolled in Non-Formal Education (NFE) programmes,¹⁰ with limited pathways available for students to transition to formal education. For those children already without access to the formal education system, guidance remains limited on ensuring they are referred to a school to support them and limited retention programmes exist when they do.

Further adding to the many challenges, in August 2020, the port area of Beirut was rocked by two enormous explosions that killed at least 218 people and injured 7,000. The explosions ripped through the port and damaged

⁵World Bank Group (2018), 'Lebanon PISA 2018' Available from:

<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/435071580399593024-0280022020/original/LEBANONPISABrief2018.pdf>

⁶ Lebanon Education Sector (May 2021). Impact of Economic Crisis and COVID 19 on Education in Lebanon Secondary Data Review Report.

⁷ UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF (Sept 2021) Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon – VASyR 2021. Preliminary Findings. Available from: <https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/media/7116/file>.

⁸ World Bank Group (2018), 'Lebanon PISA 2018' Available from:

<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/435071580399593024-0280022020/original/LEBANONPISABrief2018.pdf>

⁹ World Bank (2021) *Foundations for Building Forward Better: An Education Reform path for Lebanon*. Available from:

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/627001624033308257/pdf/Foundations-for-Building-Forward-Better-An-Education-Reform-Path-for-Lebanon.pdf>

¹⁰ Lebanon Education Sector (2021) Data on Children in Education in Lebanon for the year 2020 – 2021. Available from:

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiazTYyMzQ0MDgtZTQ2MS00MWM2LTk3M2UtNmFINWYyMjg5MzVliiwidCI6Ijc3NDZwMTk1LTE0ZTtNGZiOC05MDRiLWFiMTg5MjAyMzY2NyIsImMiOiJh9>

homes, shops, and more than 180 educational facilities¹¹, impacting at least 85,000 learners¹². The resources needed for reconstruction and rehabilitation after the blasts are putting additional pressures on already over-stretched educational funding, at a time when funds are desperately needed to help students catch-up on lost learning.¹³

In March 2020, following school closures to control the spread of COVID-19, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) acted quickly to develop a distance-learning plan. Despite these commendable efforts, children's attendance to lessons immediately fell after the shift to distance learning and many children have dropped out of the education system altogether - in both Lebanese and refugee communities.¹⁴

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

Economic crisis

Despite not requiring tuition fees, access to public education in Lebanon includes financial demands that make education out of reach for many children. These include costs for transportation, stationary, clothes and other indirect costs.¹⁵ Approximately 45% of school drop-outs in Lebanon are students from difficult social and economic backgrounds.¹⁶ With extreme poverty more than doubled from 10% to more than 34%¹⁷ the number of school drop-outs will likely rise as families struggle to cover education costs. A recent assessment by AVSI noted that socio-economic challenges accounted for 55% of factors leading to school drop-outs.¹⁸ In a separate study by World Vision, 75% of the households attributed withdrawing their children from school to their inability to pay school fees.¹⁹

Parents are facing impossible decisions on how to spend the little they have as their money loses value by the day, with 90% of respondents interviewed by Save the Children during the lockdown saying any financial support would first need to go towards buying food, and second for medicines (50%). Their family's economic situation was the top concern for children, with two-thirds citing the need for financial support as parents faced job losses, dwindling purchasing power, and soaring prices.²⁰

Families of children with disabilities are facing more and more barriers to support their children in accessing education and rehabilitation. Some families are left with no choice but to give priority to educating to their children without disability. A father in a four-member family stated that *"I have two sons, and I can't afford education fees for both of them anymore. I had to keep my son with disability out of school so I can pay for his brother's."*²¹

¹¹ UNICEF (June 2021) *Lebanon: Children's Future on the Line*. Available from:

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Lebanon_childrens_future_on_the_line_EN.pdf.pdf

¹² UNESCO (Sept 2020) Fact Sheet on Schools Rehabilitation in Beirut. 5/9/2020. Available from:

<https://en.unesco.org/news/fact-sheet-schools-rehabilitation-beirut-september-5-2020>.

¹³ World Bank (2021) *Foundations for Building Forward Better: An Education Reform path for Lebanon*. Available from:

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/627001624033308257/pdf/Foundations-for-Building-Forward-Better-An-Education-Reform-Path-for-Lebanon.pdf>

¹⁴ Plan International Lebanon, [COVID Needs Assessment](#) (April 2020)

¹⁵ Lebanon Education Sector (July 2021). Impact of Economic Crisis and COVID 19 on Education in Lebanon Secondary Data Review Report.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ UNESCWA (September 2021) Multidimensional Poverty in Lebanon (2019 – 2021): Painful Reality and Uncertain Prospects. Available from: https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/news/docs/21-00634- multidimensional_poverty_in_lebanon_policy_brief_en.pdf.

¹⁸ AVSI (September 2021) Education Rapid Needs Assessment.

¹⁹ World Vision (September 2021) Caregiver Perceptions and their Influence on Child Education and Labor Across Different Areas in Lebanon.

²⁰ Save the Children Lebanon (May 2020), [Views from the Lockdown: Children and Youth's Experience of Covid-19 in Lebanon](#)

²¹ Humanity & Inclusion's (2021) Psycho-Social outreach activities across Lebanon.

Furthermore, approximately 54,000²² children who were enrolled in private schools have migrated to the public school system during the 2020 – 2021 school year, as their families could no longer afford to pay the fees as the economy contracted and purchasing power plummeted. The majority (92%) of public schools included in the AVSI assessment reported an influx of student transfers from private or semi-private schools, with this trend expected to continue in the next academic year.²³ This is placing additional strain on the public school system, that was already struggling with a deficit of school infrastructure and resources. The increased number of students in public schools has increased the teacher per pupil ratio and heightens the risk of some schools stopping additional intakes.²⁴ This will contribute to a reduction in the number of refugee children able to enrol in second shift classes where there are few vacancies.²⁵

The current layered crises affecting Lebanon will likely mean decreased funding available for education, putting even more stress on the sector in the coming years. Government spending on education was at less than 2% of GDP in 2020, well below the OECD average of 4.4% (2016) and among the lowest in the region.²⁶ The Education 2030 Framework for Action calls for governments to allocate **4-6% of their gross domestic product and/or 15-20%** of total public expenditure to education, ensuring efficient spending and prioritizing the most marginalized groups.²⁷

Fuel and Electricity crisis

Lebanon's deepening fuel crisis has led to chronic shortages of petrol and diesel across the country and is threatening children's access to a quality education. The cost of transportation has been identified as the greatest challenge for both students and teachers to access the school due to the difficult access to fuel, with the cost of transportation rising by more than LBP 40,000 per child, and the average cost of transportation per child, per month rising to LBP 175,192.²⁸ For refugee children the high cost of transportation has also been identified as the main reason behind their missed years of formal education.²⁹ With persisting fuel shortages, it is feared that many children will be unable to reach schools as and when they re-open.

The impact of fuel shortages extends beyond the transport sector to challenging the provision of stable electricity which is integral for effective distance and in-person learning. All governorates in Lebanon are experiencing electricity interruptions that sometimes exceed 22 hours per day. The share of households without electricity has increased to 54% - and the alternatives available, such as subscriptions to private generators, have become prohibitively expensive for many families.³⁰

For students, this has impacted access to steady internet connection, assets for distance learning (mobile phones and laptops) and led to disrupted learning periods. Children attending NFE activities – largely refugee children – are disproportionately affected by lack of electricity with children in public schools estimated to have almost twice their hours of daily electricity access.³¹

²² Lebanon Education Sector (2021) Data on Children in Education in Lebanon for the year 2020 – 2021. Available from:

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrjoiZTYyMzQ0MDgtZTQ2MS00MWM2LTk3M2UtNmFINWYyMjg5MzVliwidCI6jc3NDEwMTk1LTE0ZTEtNGZiOC05MDRI-LWFiMTg5MjAyMzY2NyIsImMiOjhh9.>

²³ AVSI (September 2021) Education Rapid Needs Assessment.

²⁴ AVSI (September 2021) Education Rapid Needs Assessment.

²⁵ Lebanon Education Sector (July 2021). Impact of Economic Crisis and COVID 19 on Education in Lebanon Secondary Data Review Report.

²⁶ World Bank (2021) *Foundations for Building Forward Better: An Education Reform path for Lebanon*. Available from:

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/627001624033308257/pdf/Foundations-for-Building-Forward-Better-An-Education-Reform-Path-for-Lebanon.pdf>

²⁷ High Level Steering Committee on SDG 4 (2017) Financing for SDG 4: Making Global Education a Reality (SDG-Ed2030, SC, November 2017) Available from: <https://www.sdg4education2030.org/financing-sdg4-making-global-education-reality-sdg-ed2030-sc-november-2017>.

²⁸ AVSI (September 2021) Education Rapid Needs Assessment.

²⁹ UNHCR (September 2021) Out of School Profiling Form – Education Community Liaisons – October 2020 – September 2021.

³⁰ UNESCWA (September 2021) Multidimensional Poverty in Lebanon (2019 – 2021): Painful Reality and Uncertain Prospects. Available from: <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/news/docs/21-00634- multidimensional poverty in lebanon - policy brief - en.pdf>.

³¹ OpCit

Support for teachers

“Teachers have suffered tremendously because of the pandemic and online teaching. Their wages are very low - and that is if they are getting paid at all.” - an education official

Teachers in Lebanon have faced unprecedented challenges over the past year. In 2020, many teachers lost their jobs or were asked to work part-time, due to limited funding and the deteriorating economic situation. The economic crisis has resulted in acute losses in the value of public teachers’ salaries as they are paid in Lebanese Lira, which has lost most of its value making a teachers’ salary now worth between 1 and 2 USD an hour.³² This, coupled with delays in salary payments has resulted in frequent teacher strikes and consequently lost learning time.

In a study conducted by Save the Children (SCI) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), all the teachers interviewed said that their working conditions had deteriorated during the pandemic. This was caused by a combination of different factors including; a lack of space in their homes to teach, internet connectivity challenges, dwindling pay, and a lack of support from school administrations. Furthermore, teachers reported that they were expected to cover the costs of any additional data, internet, and other equipment on their own - despite diminishing salaries and soaring prices.³³

In addition, teachers were not adequately supported through the transition to remote learning modalities. Many teachers were not technologically skilled to prepare and deliver the various aspects of distance learning with many needing to research and self-learn in order to be able to move to distance teaching.³⁴ There was a lack of government support to teachers to create online lessons and little monitoring of the quality of education provided for children.³⁵

COVID-19 school closures and distance learning

“The quality [of teaching] my students are receiving has declined. We need financial support, technical support and access to more learning materials in place of the whiteboards and interactive materials we used in the classroom.” – A Teacher

The shift to distance learning modalities brought about many challenges, impacting learners, caregivers and teachers. Distance learning was not widely practiced in Lebanon prior to the pandemic and the sudden transition was difficult for many especially as the country grappled with the economic crisis. Most children consulted (71%) reported that the transition to distance learning was difficult³⁶. The barriers to participation in distance learning include persistent power interruption, the lack of devices and internet connection, lack of digital skills and limited learning supplies.³⁷

Of significance are the challenges related to access to distance learning by refugee and vulnerable children. Children attending second shift in public schools were largely excluded from accessing distance education,³⁸ with the recent AVSI assessment noting that some schools only targeted first shift students for distance learning.³⁹

Furthermore, children with special needs were not catered for with the new approaches. Notably, the platforms used in distance learning were not suitable for Children with Disabilities who have experienced historical seclusion and marginalization in education.⁴⁰

³² Lebanon Education Sector (July 2021). Impact of Economic Crisis and COVID 19 on Education in Lebanon Secondary Data Review Report

³³ SCI and NRC (May 2021) Impact of School Closures during COVID-19 in Lebanon.

³⁴ Lebanon Education Sector (July 2021). Impact of Economic Crisis and COVID 19 on Education in Lebanon Secondary Data Review Report

³⁵ Human Rights Watch (March 2021) Lebanon: Action Needed on Syrian Refugee Education Crisis. Available from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/26/lebanon-action-needed-syrian-refugee-education-crisis>.

³⁶ SCI and NRC (May 2021) Impact of School Closures during COVID-19 in Lebanon.

³⁷ OpCit

³⁸ Lebanon Education Sector (July 2021). Impact of Economic Crisis and COVID 19 on Education in Lebanon Secondary Data Review Report

³⁹ AVSI (September 2021) Education Rapid Needs Assessment.

⁴⁰ LAU, CLS, LERRN (2020) Education under COVID-19 Lockdown: Reflections from Teachers, Students & Parents. Available from: <https://lebanesestudies.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/booklet-covid-19eng-4augFinal.pdf>.

i) A lack of internet and technology

“Children have found the situation very difficult due to the use of a single mobile phone shared with all the family, the constant power outages and the disruption of the internet network.” A parent

Unsteady internet connection and limited access to technological devices to enable effective online learning are major setbacks to many children’s access to education during COVID-19. In Lebanon, this is due to the high cost of data and electronic devices as a result of hyperinflation as well as inadequate telecommunications and internet infrastructure in rural areas.⁴¹

The most common challenge reported by children was a lack of internet or data (73%) followed by having to share their learning device (phone, tablet or computer) with other family members (63%). A majority of children (84%) rely on shared devices to access online courses and many expressed that the frequent power-cuts disrupt lessons.

These obstacles are likely to become more pronounced as power-cuts become more frequent and Lebanon teeters on the edge of a nationwide internet outage, according to the head of the state-owned telecom company.⁴² Chronic fuel shortages and generator breakdowns have challenged online communication and undermined distance learning that relies on a strong internet connection and access to digital devices.

ii) Home environment

“The family situation is very difficult. We are thirteen people who are living in just two rooms, and the economic situation is very serious - this affects the children’s behaviour and their ability to concentrate on studying.” – a Parent

Having a conducive environment within the home is a critical element for effective distance learning. However, this has been fraught with many challenges that have undermined the quality of learning. **Parents and caregivers were concerned that their children did not have a quiet space to study, that multiple siblings struggled to share a small space to learn, or that their homes were otherwise not conducive for learning.** One parent explained: *“My child found it difficult to study remotely due to his young age, inability to study...and the noise inside the house from his younger siblings.”*

Another concern for half of (50%) parents and caregivers was that they did not feel equipped to fully support their child’s learning at home. Some of the parents said that they had no time to help, others were illiterate, experienced language barriers, or did not have any knowledge about technology, thus felt that they were unable to help their children when they encountered challenges. **Of the children consulted, 63% of Lebanese children and 49% of Syrian refugee children said that they had someone who could support their learning at home.**⁴³

“We went through daily challenges and a lot of stress in adjusting to remote learning that was not accessible nor accommodated to our son’s needs, spending hours for one lesson to be acquired to keep him in line with his classmates.” - A mother of a child with visual impairment

Assessments also indicate that students struggled to concentrate on their studies at home, with 75% of children aged 6-14 reporting that they had difficulty concentrating or were unable to concentrate, which is possibly indicative of hunger and mental distress.⁴⁴

⁴¹ SMEX (Oct 2020) Remote Learning and the Digital Divide in Lebanon. Available from: <https://smex.org/remote-learning-and-the-digital-divide-in-lebanon/>.

⁴² Imad Kreidieh, as reported in L’Orient Today, 25/08/2021, see https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1272641/with-the-state-telecom-monopoly-crippled-lebanon-may-soon-go-offline.html?utm_campaign=Post-70879&utm_medium=email&utm_source=CMS-34

⁴³ SCI and NRC (May 2021) Impact of School Closures during COVID-19 in Lebanon. Unpublished.

⁴⁴ UNICEF (June 2021) *Lebanon: Children’s Future on the Line*. Available from: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Lebanon_childrens_future_on_the_line_EN.pdf.pdf

THE IMPACT OF THE EDUCATION CRISIS ON CHILDREN

Beyond the repercussions for the country's development, there are several implications of Lebanon's education crisis for each child who drops out of school or has their learning impeded.

Impact on children's learning outcomes

“The quality [of teaching] my students are receiving has declined. We need financial support, technical support and access to more learning materials in place of the whiteboards and interactive materials we used in the classroom.” – A Teacher

After the shift to online learning, children have faced a significant decline in the quality of teaching, impacting their learning outcomes. One analysis points to remote learning deepening the difference in education outcomes between private and public schools and between students from more affluent or vulnerable households, such as those who have better access to generators for electricity or better access to internet connection, laptops and the software required for online remote learning. It notes that this affects students' adaptability and abilities to access technological solutions, in addition to the challenges of electricity cuts and costly internet access.⁴⁵

A majority of children (82%) engaged in the SCI/NRC research said that **the quality of teaching online was inferior to classroom teaching, with most (88%) feeling like they were learning less online.**⁴⁶

According to the World Bank, Lebanon has one of the lowest human capital indicators in the region, and it is expected to decline further, given school closures and the various ongoing crises. The country is facing a lost year of learning, which will have lasting negative effects on learning outcomes, from an already low baseline of only 6.3 learning-adjusted school years. Most recent estimates suggest that up to one additional learning-adjusted years of schooling may be lost, on average, as a result of ongoing school closures (Azevedo et al. 2021).⁴⁷

Protection risks facing out-of-school children

“The students now are more vulnerable because we can no longer monitor their wellbeing at home. We have no clue whether they are being affected by any form of violence at home. Child labour and child marriage increased tremendously because the parents don't have the financial capacity to support their children, so they either marry their daughters off or put them to work to support their families.” – A Teacher

Out-of-school children are at greater risk of violence, abuse and exploitation, in particular forms of sexual and gender-based violence (such as rape and child marriage), harmful work, recruitment into armed groups and other life-threatening activities.⁴⁸ Furthermore, out-of-school children with disabilities are at least three times more likely to be abused or neglected than their peers without disabilities.⁴⁹ In Lebanon, the longer school closures persist, the longer children would be exposed to these risks.

Most children (79%) noted that they would feel safer if schools or learning centres re-opened. They explained that they could access better support and services at school, that their teachers watch over them, and that their schools keep them – or their friends – safe from threats at home or in their communities.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Lebanon Education Sector (July 2021). Impact of Economic Crisis and COVID 19 on Education in Lebanon Secondary Data Review Report

⁴⁶ SCI and NRC (May 2021) Impact of School Closures during COVID-19 in Lebanon.

⁴⁷ World Bank (2021) *Foundations for Building Forward Better: An Education Reform path for Lebanon*. Available from: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/627001624033308257/pdf/Foundations-for-Building-Forward-Better-An-Education-Reform-Path-for-Lebanon.pdf>

⁴⁸ Save the Children (Sept 2021) *Build Forward Better: How the Global Community Must Act Now to Secure Children's Learning in Crises*. Available from: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/19526/pdf/build-forward-better.pdf>

⁴⁹ Jones, L (2012). Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: A systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies.

⁵⁰ SCI and NRC (May 2021) Impact of School Closures during COVID-19 in Lebanon.

i) Child Labour

The reduction of families' income has led to mounting pressure on children to replace learning with income-generating work. 10.8% of the households surveyed by World Vision reported having at least one child aged 3 to 18 years old engaged in child labour.⁵¹ This is especially common for boys, who are being forced to leave school without the basic skills required for the labour market.

The most common (88%) risk of being away from school reported by children consulted was the increased risk of child labour.⁵² According to UNICEF, 9% of families sent their child to work, 15% stopped their children's education and 60% had to buy food on credit or borrow money. The situation is even worse for Syrian households, and with 90% of Syrians fallen below the extreme poverty line due to the economic crisis, many Syrian parents rely on their children working for additional income⁵³ with 5% of Syrian refugee children now engaged in child labor⁵⁴. Children as young as six have been working in the streets, in agricultural fields and garages or on construction sites, where they are exposed to risks of exploitation, violence and abuse.⁵⁵



Some of the children missed lessons because they had to work, in order to be able to afford school. One of the parents explained: *“Children here are missing lessons as they are collecting and selling iron – which they need to do to be able to buy the data needed for distance learning.”*⁵⁶

ii) Violence, exploitation and abuse

The other most common risks reported by children was violence at home (41%), child marriage (16%), and sexual abuse (2%). All of the teachers consulted emphasised that their students are at heightened risk of these risks since schools closed. They reported that being able to see children in the classroom or learning centre helped them better identify and refer students at risk of domestic violence or sexual abuse. Children from poor families and Syrian or Palestinian refugee children are at particularly high risk. **Globally, children whose schools were closed reported rates of violence in the home that were more than double those of children whose schools were physically open to attend in person.**⁵⁷

Some parents admitted that they had become aggressive towards their children as a result of extreme stress levels or feeling overwhelmed. One parent said: *“I have become angry, stressed, and feel suffocated at times. I hit my children for not being able to deal with distance education and because of the difficult economic conditions... I become angry because I can't support my children.”*

Due to the dire economic situation, families feel pressure to marry their daughters earlier, to relieve the overwhelming financial pressure on their family. **Teachers and students consulted in one study reported seeing an increase in child marriage.** According to previous reports, girls are being married at a younger age

⁵¹ World Vision (September 2021) Caregiver Perceptions and their Influence on Child Education and Labor Across Different Areas in Lebanon.

⁵² SCI and NRC (May 2021) Impact of School Closures during COVID-19 in Lebanon

⁵³ ECHO (Sept 2021) Education and Psychosocial Support for Syrian Refugee Children. Available from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/education-and-psychosocial-support-syrian-refugee-children>

⁵⁴ Op-Cit

⁵⁵ UNICEF (June 2021) *Lebanon: Children's Future on the Line*. Available from:

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Lebanon_childrens_future_on_the_line_EN.pdf

⁵⁶ SCI and NRC (May 2021) Impact of School Closures during COVID-19 in Lebanon.

⁵⁷ Save the Children (2020) The Hidden Impact of COVID-19 on Child Protection and Wellbeing

(13 to 14 years old) in 2020, compared to 2019 (16 to 17 years old). Moreover, child marriage rates in general have increased across the country.⁵⁸

iii) Impact on children’s mental health

“As the economic situation is getting worse, children are suffering. They are also witnessing the anxiety their parents are experiencing, which makes them worry even more for their future.” – a Teacher

Schools play a critical role in enhancing children’s social, emotional and physical wellbeing. Children are able to play with their friends, identify and express their emotions and to know who to turn to for help.⁵⁹ School closures and distant learning measures in Lebanon have had an adverse impact on children’s mental health and wellbeing, triggering their distress and anxiety and negatively impacting their learning outcomes⁶⁰.

Not being able to go back to school has since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic been the stress factor for children⁶¹. Almost all (97%) the children engaged in the study conducted by Save the Children and NRC had experienced negative feelings since being out of school with the majority of these (59%) noting that they felt worse the longer they were out of school. Children reported that these negative feelings affected their ability to concentrate and motivation to learn, their energy levels and ability to sleep, and their appetite.⁶² A Save the Children study conducted at the height of the lockdown found that 58% of girls were more likely to be homebound than 40% of boys, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness.⁶³



⁵⁸ Gender-Based Violence Information Management System, [Ongoing Impact of COVID-19, Economic Situation and Beirut Blast](#), Quarter 3 (November 2020)

⁵⁹ Save the Children (Sept 2021) Build Forward Better: How the Global Community Must Act Now to Secure Children’s Learning in Crises. Available from: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/19526/pdf/build-forward-better.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Lebanon Education Sector (May 2021). Impact of Economic Crisis and COVID 19 on Education in Lebanon Secondary Data Review Report.

⁶¹ Plan International Lebanon (April 2020) [COVID Needs Assessment](#). Available from: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/lebanon_covid-19_needs_assessment.pdf.

⁶² SCI and NRC (May 2021) Impact of School Closures during COVID-19 in Lebanon.

⁶³ Save the Children (May 2020) Views from the Lockdown: Children and Youth’s Experience of COVID-19 in Lebanon. Available from: <https://lebanon.savethechildren.net/sites/lebanon.savethechildren.net/files/library/Child%20Survey%20Summary.pdf>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The vast majority of children would want to go back if schools reopened, and prefer learning in a classroom.⁶⁴ **The MEHE should receive unwavering political and financial support in their aim to re-open schools as soon as possible:**

- **Donors should support the MEHE in its plan to reopen schools, by providing institutional funding to the Ministry and increasing contributions to the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) and the Emergency Response Plan (ERP).**
- **The Lebanese Government should increase national expenditure on education to between 15 – 20% (or 4-6% of GDP) in line with international benchmarks.⁶⁵**
- **Donors should increase funding for cash-based safety net programmes that cover direct and indirect costs of education, such as school supplies and equipment, as well as transport fees for poorer households.**

While reopening schools should be the first priority, there is a possibility that some may be unable to open or will have insufficient capacity to accommodate increased transfers from private schools. Families themselves are also concerned that they may not be able to get their children to school as fuel becomes scarce and the economic crisis deteriorates. **This scenario could leave many vulnerable children at risk of no or insufficient schooling for the third academic year in a row:**

- **The MEHE together with education partners should urgently carry out a contingency planning exercise, with different scenarios, to prepare for the eventuality that some schools may be unable to sustainably open.**
- **The MEHE and education partners should enhance the collection and exchange of data on out of school children and other gaps in the sector in order to adequately inform current and future sector plans and interventions.**

Children who are currently outside the formal education system cannot be neglected. Many of these children including children with disabilities and refugee children are the most vulnerable in society. This pivotal moment should be used as an opportunity to ensure that children who did not previously have access to education can be supported to enter school. **This will help to ensure that the long-term legacy of the pandemic will not be an increase in inequality:**

- **The MEHE should fast-track efforts to tackle structural inequality in the education system, in light of the magnitude and urgency of the current learning crisis.**
- **The MEHE and education partners should set up and implement a comprehensive school enrolment barrier tracking and response mechanism to address barriers to accessing education by refugee and other vulnerable children.**
- **Civil society actors should increase the provision of child-centred community-based, and cost-efficient non-formal learning opportunities for children to access learning while concurrently enhancing the long-term pathways back into formal education.**
 - **Given the current fuel and power deficits, these learning opportunities should include low-tech and no-tech options.**
- **Donors should increase funding for Non-Formal Education (NFE) and ensure that these include necessary pathways to transition to formal education.**

Focussing on and investing in children's education will not just radically transform children's chances and safeguard their futures, it is a vital step in ensuring economic growth and recovery for the country. Education partners in Lebanon are committed to supporting the MEHE with its plans to get children back in the classroom, and will work to ensure that all children can access quality and inclusive learning opportunities.

⁶⁴ SCI and NRC (May 2021) Impact of School Closures during COVID-19 in Lebanon.

⁶⁵ As agreed in the Incheon Declaration

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