

UNICEF and the COVID-19 Response for Education in Jordan: One Month On



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BACKGROUND

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is significantly impacting children's education around the world. On 14 March 2020, the Government of Jordan announced that all schools, kindergartens and universities (private and public) were to be closed from 15 March, impacting 2.37 million learners¹ (50% male/female). **Learning outcomes** in Jordan are improving, but significant **inequalities remain** by **gender** and **nationality**.² School closures bring the risk of increased learning inequality and drop out.

Countries affected by **ongoing conflict** are especially vulnerable to the social and economic impacts of COVID-19. In 2020, the Syria crisis continues into its ninth consecutive year. The registered Syrian refugee population in Jordan. The includes over 230,900 school-age children out of 656,213 registered refugees³ Numbers of unregistered refugees in Jordan are much higher.⁴ While 85 per cent of Syrian refugees reside in host communities, over 120,000 (79 per cent of whom are women and children) live in camps.⁵

The Government of Jordan is committed to ensure learning continuity for children through **distance learning** during COVID-19. **Televised lessons** are broadcast nationally, and **digital platforms** have been established to facilitate access to educational content and a learning management system. A web-landing page has been created for teachers which hosts professional development courses focused on using new technologies. These initiatives are at a nascent stage and will require significant technical support to be effective in improving learning outcomes. Challenges also exist around children having adequate technology and connectivity to access the sites.

¹ UNESCO, "Global Monitoring of School Closures Caused by Covid-19" [link](#)

² OECD, Education GPS, PISA 2018 Jordan, [link](#)

³ *ibid*

⁴ United Nations, Department of Economics and Social Affairs, World Population Prospects 2019, Accessed March 2020 [link](#)

⁵ UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response- Dec 2019," Accessed February 2020 [link](#)

On 22 March 2020, MOE announced the launch of Darsak, an **online education platform** set up to host the new televised lesson content by lesson and for grades 1-12. In early April, Noorspace, linked to EMIS, was set up as a **learning management system** to provide teachers and schools the tools to track attendance, monitor engagement and set assessments online. The MOE created a website landing page to host pre-existing **teacher professional development** programmes on technology, offering 90 training hours of training in partnership with Edraak.

UNICEF RESPONSE

Hygiene Awareness in Schools



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Although there were no COVID-19 cases reported in Jordan until 2 March, UNICEF began preparations and preventative support in conjunction with the Government of Jordan during February. This assistance included support for schools in both the host community and camp settings with **hygiene awareness** campaigns that included **handwashing demonstrations** and introducing **social distancing**. Additionally, UNICEF procured and distributed emergency supplies of soap bars (620,000), family kits (500), hygiene kits (3,000) and bottles of hand sanitizer (4,000) for vulnerable families in camps and the host community.

Technical Assistance and Emergency COVID-19 Response

With the closure of schools, UNICEF accelerated its COVID-19 related activities and activated emergency level planning and support. This included increased **technical assistance** to the MOE, including the secondment of a UNICEF team member to MOE to support **emergency response planning**.

UNICEF, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) and The World Health Organization (WHO) have supported the MOE and Ministry of Health to develop **COVID-19 School Guidelines**. These guidelines include actionable guidance for safe operations through the prevention, early detection, control of COVID-19 and reopening of schools and other educational facilities. These were based on the Global Guidance on Safe School Operation developed by the three agencies in early March⁷. On 31 March 2020, the Government of Jordan approved these guidelines for roll-out across all MOE schools. This will support the COVID-19 response, particularly when schools reopen.

UNICEF has provided **financial and technical support** of 300,000 JOD (nearly 425,000 USD) to MOE to support the continued filming of televised lessons from mid-March. UNICEF purchased and delivered 200

⁶ Amani, a student at Al Khader Mixed Primary school, located in a rural part of the host community, takes part in a hygiene awareness session during the first week of March as part of UNICEF's COVID-19 preparedness efforts with MOE

⁷ IFRC, [link](#)

laptops to MOE to enable teachers to connect with students through Microsoft teams to create **virtual learning spaces**.

From March, the MOE began forming its Education During Emergency Plan (EDEP) 2020-2022, a guiding framework for the education sector. This document is presently being reviewed by donors and agencies to help the government formulate its action plans to support learning during COVID-19 and the anticipated recovery phase once schools reopen, including a costed-implementation plan for the EDEP.

Distance Learning

UNICEF is supporting **distance learning** of vulnerable children without access to connectivity through provision of printed materials and devices, where possible. In early March, UNICEF revised available Grade 1 to Grade 6 learning materials in Arabic and mathematics. Printed copies of these materials are being distributed to children in vulnerable areas including camps, double-shift schools in the host community and children living in temporary settlements. A donation of 140 tablets with hotspots are being provided to children in King Abdullah Park and Azraq refugee camps, including 60 children with disabilities. The tablets were pre-installed with Madrasa, which contains over 5,000 learning resources for Grades 1 to 12. UNICEF loaded additional applications, where the app developers provided free subscriptions. Pupils' progress in learning can be tracked through these applications and UNICEF's facilitators are being trained to support this process.

UNICEF has also considered **new modalities to share learning activities with children online** where devices for accessing internet and connectivity are limited. Learning activities developed on the principal of family learning have been prepared daily for children aged 6 to 12 years. The activities are related where possible to the lessons broadcasted on Darsak, designed to deepen children's understanding of the concept taught through applying knowledge, problem solving and being creative. The activities are also supported with short videos where appropriate. UNICEF staff also encourage pupils to photograph their work and display this on **social media** to celebrate achievements, share their ideas and to get feedback from facilitators about their work.

Up to 6,000 children enrolled in the **non-formal education** (NFE) Drop-Out programme have access to teacher-student groups via WhatsApp and Facebook. These groups are monitored by MOE Supervisory Unit members to ensure quality and online safety. Online training on distance education for NFE facilitators is being conducted as well as the creation of a bank of quality assured e-learning materials. Free data access to e-learning resources is being provided to all NFE students. To better target support for students in the Drop Out programme, UNICEF has administered a **survey** to assess access to online learning of students in camps and host community enrolled in the NFE programme. This baseline data will help inform the design of improved strategies to support NFE students throughout COVID-19.

UNICEF has extended digital support to continued online learning also to UNICEF-supported early childhood education centres through partners via **social media**. By mid-April, 20 KG2 centres were supporting over 1,000 KG2 aged children and their families. Information shared by social media includes **fun learning activities** and **parental support**. UNICEF is planning further support to MOE with donors on school readiness programmes over the summer for KG2 aged children whose school year was interrupted or for those who were unable to enroll in school during 2019/2020 to be prepared for the new school year.

In collaboration with MOE, UNICEF is working to also support children's **wellbeing, self-resiliency** and **self-efficacy** during this challenging period. UNICEF is developing e-learning **Mental Health** and **Psychosocial Support** materials along with Child Protection materials for teacher training. Psychosocial support instructional videos are also in development for children and parents that include topics like anxiety, stress, dealing with anger, problem solving, hope, self-esteem, confidence, communication and acceptance. Videos are also being localized that target both younger and older children with knowledge of COVID-19 protection. Finally, UNICEF is finalizing better parenting messages that are anticipated to be disseminated through several MOE platforms.

Inclusive Education

In response to COVID-19, and to ensure continued learning of **children with disabilities**, UNICEF has undertaken several measures both in camps and the host community. UNICEF has provided disability inclusive workbooks to students from KG2 to Grade 6 before school closure (covering Arabic, mathematics, sensory and perceptual skills). Workbooks have been designed considering each student's individual education plan. These kits have been supported by **videos** circulated to parents (both in camp and host community settings) that support parents in undertaking **speech and occupational therapy** with their child or children during the lockdown. Parents are also supported by MOE inclusive **shadow teachers** through WhatsApp groups.

In the camps, where to date, no cases have been identified, special permission was obtained by UNICEF to enable **shadow teachers** to continue to conduct **monthly home visits** to critical cases. These visits are conducted by two **shadow teachers** at a time, one that supports therapy and the other in support of learning. Nearly 700 children with disabilities are being served in Azraq and Za'atari refugee camps through this modality.

UNICEF COORDINATION

UNICEF has long served as co-chair of the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG) in Jordan, **coordinating** and supporting the **sector's response to learning**. The agency also serves as a member of the Education Sector Donor Group (ESDG), supporting **resource mobilization** on behalf of vulnerable children in Jordan since the Syria crisis began. Since mid-March, UNICEF has organised weekly web-based sector coordination meetings, strengthening COVID-19 response mechanisms, including a **Partner Mapping** of support from ESWG members to government and children, and a **Learning Resources Survey**, highlighting available distance learning resources, assessment mapping and analytical data compilation. UNICEF has been actively engaged in donor coordination with MOE to ensure timely and high-quality technical assistance is provided for the Emergency Response Plan, including response and recovery.

CHALLENGES

Disparity in Access to Learning Opportunities

Although the education system is improving⁸, many children in Jordan struggle to learn the basics - with 53 per cent of ten-year old's unable to read an age appropriate text⁹. **Pre-service education** has only been introduced in the last five years and only a small percentage of prospective teachers have the opportunity to take a pre-service course. There are plans to expand pre-service education, and that it will serve as a prerequisite to entering the profession to improve learning. MOE is addressing the quality of teaching by developing a career pathway and giving access to teachers to in-service professional development that

⁸ OECD, Education GPS, PISA 2018 Jordan, [link](#)

⁹ World Bank Report, 2019

will also contribute to improved learning outcomes. Developing teachers' skills and understanding to enable them to use a wider range of teaching strategies is key to increasing learning outcomes.

MOE has utilized two platforms to support distance learning during COVID-19 known as Darsak and Noor Space. While these platforms have the potential to provide students with access to continued learning at scale, **technology solutions** can only reach those that have internet connectivity, adequate data appropriate devices. Gaps in access to distance education during school closures will likely result in greater levels of learning inequality.

Nationally, 70 per cent of students in Jordan reported in early April that they had used the MOE online platforms¹⁰. This figure drops sharply for **vulnerable groups**, such as refugee children, and those living in temporary settlements. As a result, there exists the risk that learning continuity will be ensured for some, but denied to the most vulnerable, and that school closures may further increase gaps in **education inequality and learning poverty**. While major gaps remain, some progress has been made to improve access. MOE websites are **data free** during specified times of day and electricity hours have been extended in refugee camps to ensure children can watch television when MOE lessons are aired. However, given disparities in access to distance education, there is a risk that learning inequality will increase as a result of COVID19.

Learning Interactions

For learning to take place, children need the opportunity to engage with the content that has been presented on Darsak. This requires student interaction with one another, teachers, parental support and the availability of interactive learning resources.

Access has been provided by MOE to Microsoft Teams for all students and teachers (with priority for Grade 8 – Grade 12). While some teachers and students are able to use this platform, many will be excluded. Given the lack of devices and connectivity amongst more disadvantaged families, this modality will not reach the most **vulnerable children**. MOE is planning to launch a new platform, Mothoum, which will host curriculum linked activities for pupils' grade 1 to 6 in core subjects to support their learning after the televised broadcasts. The content for this platform was derived from a previous project co-funded by UNICEF and partner to develop blended learning in schools. However, for those children enrolled in lower grades, there remains little direction for students, teachers or families for learning across this medium. A national learning assessment conducted in mid-April will provide new data on student connectivity to the government's online learning platforms.

In early April, a **survey** of over 1,000 teachers of Grade 7 to 10 in the host community undertaken by UNICEF and partner, found that 90 per cent of schools had a Facebook page and over 80 per cent had engaged with their students since the school closures. Many teachers are sharing assignments, providing support and receiving feedback via WhatsApp. The reach, level of student participation in these group, or impact on learning outcomes, is not yet known.

Pedagogy and Distant Learning

Most countries in the world, whatever their economic circumstances, are struggling with the concept of

¹⁰ MOE Report, April 2020

distance learning for children, especially with early grades. It is not a simple case of replicating a school environment in the home and many changes are being made by teachers, schools and governments to try to be responsive to learning experiences as they are implemented.

Jordan has made great strides in providing televised broadcasts and developing a learning management system to accommodate all school children. It now needs support to set up the **technological infrastructure** necessary for creating instructional learning with social interactions going forward at school and community levels to respond to the daily needs of all children and especially the most vulnerable. The COVID-19 context and the initiatives already on-going that will provide more extensive teacher professional development and a robust career pathway may provide the stimulus to review and overhaul the current approach to teaching and learning which is currently not producing a cost effective model with the impact that Jordan needs to develop a competitive economy. To achieve this Jordan needs to look at its current approaches to education in the classroom and resist replicating this to an online version of the same.

Teachers need training on **distance learning pedagogies**, and access to a range of appropriate e-learning materials. Many are supporting children's learning via WhatsApp. Teachers are likely to find it difficult to engage students and progress individual learning outcomes without further advice and support. A professional development course on distance learning has been made available through Jo Teachers, with 30,000 teachers logging on to the platform in the first week.

Learning and E-Safety

There are worldwide concerns that as whole countries move to e-learning that the **safety of children** must be closely guarded. Countries, including Jordan, where up to this time there has not been a large number of online requirements by pupils, teachers and parents, are particularly vulnerable. Training all teachers on basic **e-safety** and **cyberbullying** awareness, while furthering **awareness** for parents and children is imperative. UNICEF is planning to revise an e-safety module developed in Jordan 18 months ago to reflect the COVID situation and make this available to teachers nationally.

LOOKING FORWARD

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During the immediate response phase, UNICEF is engaging with partners to support students through various forms of **distance learning**, recognizing the increased risk that these vulnerable children may drop out during school closures. Challenges remain in the ability of children to engage with distance learning due to limitations of data, connectivity, compatible devices and IT skills. Teachers, facilitators and parents will need to be supported to ensure both **retention** and **learning** of children during this critical period. This includes developing training on distance learning, and sharing of quality assured online materials, to support teachers and facilitators to engage with students, as well as targeted support for parents of the most at risk children.

Looking forwards, there is need to plan for **recovery** and to ensure **sustainability** of interventions implemented during the response. UNICEF is supporting the MOE to aid students in catching up in preparation for next year, psychosocial support for children and families, and preparation for back to school efforts. Investments in **blended learning** during the COVID-19 response can be of benefit to the Jordan education system longer term (i.e. the sustainability phase). As an example, UNICEF is supporting the MOE to strengthen the new Jo Teachers platform to support **online teacher professional development**.

These efforts will require **additional resources**. At present, only 7 per cent of UNICEF Jordan's education labeled budget remains flexible, limiting the agency's capacity to respond nimbly to the COVID-19 crisis. Although several donors have pledged funding in the past month, at least \$3 million in additional funding will be required to adequately support the COVID-19 response to ensure the most vulnerable children continued access to education and a safe transition back to school.

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