

Global Education Forum

High-level Meeting Summary — April 29, 2021

Background

The third meeting of the Global Education Forum (Forum) was convened on April 29, 2021. The meeting was held at a time when the global community continues to face ever-growing challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to essential services such as education and health continue to be reduced and the global community now has a generation of children who are at risk of losing out on their right to education. Budgets for education are at risk of being reduced due to the financial impacts of COVID-19, which risks widening the pre-existing inequalities for low- and middle-income countries. As part of COVID recovery plans, leaders must prioritize and protect education budgets given education's fundamental role in delivering the entire Sustainable Development Goal agenda and unlocking opportunities for the world's children and youth.

In this context, the Forum's role is more important than ever, ensuring a coordinated and aligned agenda for action on global education. As the world reimagines education and focuses attention on recovery, the Forum can build on the momentum generated by the successful [Save Our Future campaign and white paper](#), the recommendations of the UNESCO 2020 [Global Education Meeting Declaration](#), and other donor actions to make quality education for all a reality. **These efforts called on international donors to act urgently to support programs in four priority policy areas:** (1) the safe reopening of schools and delivery of essential services (including school feeding programs); (2) addressing learning losses and aligning systems to the goal of learning (with special attention to foundational learning as an essential building block); (3) strengthening teachers and the education workforce; and (4) harnessing digital learning.

Objectives

The objectives of the third Forum meeting were to:

1. Recognize the challenges for education in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the opportunities to ensure that recovery plans include all children in school and learning;
2. Acknowledge commitments and ongoing efforts by world leaders and members of the Forum at national and global levels to operationalize recommendations on school health and nutrition, vaccines, foundational learning, and digital learning; and
3. Agree on the way forward for the Forum.

Recommendations and Key Follow-up Actions

In advance of the Forum, a number of working papers were prepared, including concrete proposals for collective actions around school health and nutrition, vaccination plans, foundational learning, and digital learning.¹ **Key recommendations and follow-up actions highlighted by Forum participants during the discussions at the third Forum meeting are summarized below.**

SCHOOL HEALTH AND NUTRITION

→ Summary of Discussion

There was broad support for the proposals calling on Forum members to: 1) jointly commit to advocating for the scale-up and improvement of the quality and efficiency of school health and nutrition programs as a key response to the crises caused by COVID-19 – including urgently repairing what was lost during the pandemic and expanding access to the most vulnerable; and 2) provide leadership to rethink coordination and financing for school health and nutrition, an issue that can yield outcomes for at least four sectors – education, health, social protection, and agriculture – but that needs a new, multisectoral approach.

Specific points made include:

- **High-level global advocacy is key to ensuring school health and nutrition is integral to COVID-19 recovery packages and SDG action plans.** This includes repairing what was lost during the pandemic, expanding access to the most vulnerable and improving quality and efficiency of school feeding. The 2021 Food Systems Summit, G7, G20, and RewirEd provide high-level platforms to advocate for school feeding.
- **Strong emphasis on the need for a multisectoral approach.** This will require collaboration between the ministries of education, health, water, sanitation, and more. It will also require cooperation between public and private sectors.
- **Wider perspectives on school health and nutrition should be included.** This includes a holistic approach to wider health issues (e.g. psychosocial support) and viewing school meals as a critical social safety net.
- **Increased and better coordinated financing (domestic and international) is required for school feeding as a critical basic need.** Mobilization of additional resources must also be accompanied by efforts to improve efficiency, including breaking down silos, reducing fragmentation, promoting synergy across sectors, and putting in place transition mechanisms for funding until countries are self-reliant. As most school feeding programs are supported by domestic funds, understanding where external support is crucial and where transition is possible will be central to future growth in sustainable school feeding.

¹ Detailed proposals can be found in background Action Memos. Leading coordinating partners in the Forum on these issues include the World Food Programme for School Health and Nutrition, the TAG group on Educational Institutions and COVID-19 (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Health Organization) for Vaccines, the World Bank and USAID for Foundational Learning, and UNICEF for Digital Learning.

→ Follow-up Actions

- **Forum members to promote school health and nutrition leading up to the 2021 Food Systems Summit.** Several Forum members committed to raise their voices on school feeding at key events leading up to the Food Systems Summit, including pre-summit dialogues and a high-level event in New York in September 2021. In addition, **a cross-sectoral school health and nutrition roundtable will be hosted during the RewirEd summit in December 2021 to keep up the momentum after the Food Systems Summit.**
- **Forum members to support the creation and launch of the Global Coalition on School Feeding at the United Nations Food Systems Summit in September 2021.** The coalition will raise awareness and generate resources for school feeding. It will be comprised of countries of all income levels.
- **Forum to establish a Multisectoral Taskforce for School Health and Nutrition Financing under the Global School Feeding Coalition to rethink and coordinate financing.** The task force will map, coordinate, and help mobilize funding of school-based health and nutrition services to support developing countries to accelerate and broaden their efforts, including by developing innovative approaches to funding school meals.

TEACHERS AND VACCINATION AS PART OF SCHOOL REOPENING

→ Summary of Discussion

There was broad support for proposals calling on Forum members to: 1) increase funding for countries to implement recommended international guidance for safe school reopening; 2) contribute or increase funding to COVAX as a way to ensure fair and equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and provide a foundation for the prioritization of education workers; and 3) join calls for teachers to be supported and prioritized for vaccination as essential workers, aligned with the SAGE Roadmap.

Specific points made include:

- **The public health response to COVID-19 must prioritize the education workforce for COVID-19 vaccination to keep schools open.** Vaccination of teachers also has a multiplier effect for the community: if children are back in schools, parents can return to work.
- **Funding must be increased for safe school reopening** and spending improved and fast-tracked. Countries should be supported to implement recommended guidance, in particular the [Framework for Reopening Schools](#) and [the Annex to Considerations in adjusting public health and social measures in the context of COVID-19](#). Funding to COVAX should be increased to ensure fair and equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and provide a foundation for the prioritization of education workers.

→ Follow-up Actions

- **Forum members to support monitoring of teacher prioritization in COVID-19 vaccination rollout plans** in accordance with the COVAX SAGE guidelines (building on [existing efforts](#)) amidst the need to urgently increase funding for COVAX.
- **Some Forum members committed to increasing funding for COVAX.**

DIGITAL LEARNING

→ Summary of Discussion

There was broad support for the proposals calling for Forum members to 1) work towards and advocate for common objectives with a focus on those furthest behind; 2) support countries in developing plans for the expansion and financing of digital learning; 3) develop a long-term global investment and support strategy that is adaptive to country needs; and 4) consider a special initiative on Open Educational Resources (OER) to improve access to digital learning tools in the short term.

Specific points made include:

- **There is a need to formulate and jointly advocate for digital learning objectives and targets for low- and middle-income countries, with a strong emphasis on marginalized children**, including the poorest, refugee and displaced children, girls, and the disabled. Accommodations should be made using no-tech and low-tech digital approaches to reach all children now, while providing a pathway towards the wider use of quality digital learning.
- **The scale up of digital learning must be properly coordinated and phased.** Scale-up must be guided by intersectoral digital expansion plans that properly sequence rollout of education technology and wider ecosystem investments including a broad range of actors and stakeholders. Investments in digital transformation ecosystems will need to start with mapping the existing connectivity as well as the status of wider digital learning readiness. Special emphasis must be given to the “soft infrastructure” including proper training of teachers and educators to leverage and use education technology.
- **Development and implementation of expansion plans, including short-term and long-term financing plans, must be supported by international donors and private partners.** Such plans will provide a basis for more effective donor coordination. The international community can also set standards and provide a regulatory framework for quality digital learning.
- **Education budgets should fund digital learning, complementing investments in connectivity supported by other parts of the budget.** Connectivity is an enabling factor for widespread and effective digital learning, but investments in connectivity should be led by the telecommunications sector. The education sector should focus on digital learning solutions to leverage connectivity for learning such as teacher training and digital content development, while also reaching all learners now through no- and low-tech solutions.
- **There is a need for a global sustainable investment strategy that is adaptive and flexible enough to meet the specific needs of countries.** It is critical to work with a broad range of actors, including the private sector, to achieve universal access to digital learning. Long-term investments are needed (e.g., the Giga bond to fund connectivity).
- **Forum members were called to support OER.** There are economies of scale linked to the development of high-quality curriculum resources that offer strong value-for-money. Furthermore, OER provides learners and teachers with content in local languages and tailored to the right level – evidence-based ways to improve learning.
- **Forum members should establish a common set of principles and minimum quality standards to fund digital learning and develop a monitoring mechanism to assess coordination and progress.** Monitoring can help establish what are the most effective interventions and which provide the most value for money.

→ Follow-up Actions

- **A number of Forum members committed to work together in support of countries' digital learning, expansion, and transformation.** This could include collaboration in such areas as developing targets for digital learning; bringing together evidence on effective ways to improve learning outcomes by harnessing appropriate technology; working with individual client countries on developing digital learning expansion plans in regions; and supporting countries to identify sources of finance to fund such plans.
- **Several Forum members expressed interest in supporting the development of digital learning expansion plans.** Plans must lay out a roadmap for affordable digital expansion, possibly including plans to connect schools to the Internet, and must detail how each element will be funded.
- **Forum members also expressed support for the Broadband Commission working groups on Digital Learning and 21st Century Financing Models** which will produce reports that map the components of the digital learning ecosystem, potential funding sources, and instruments for financing in developing countries.
- **A high-level public-private investor roundtable will be hosted at the Expo during the RewirEd summit in December 2021.** It aims to support the mobilization of resources for connectivity and digital learning.
- **The Global Declaration on Connectivity will be developed and launched at RewirEd.** Forum members expressed support for the declaration. The international community was called on to set standards and provide a better regulatory framework for quality digital learning.

FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

→ Summary of Discussion

There was broad support for the proposals calling for Forum members to take action by 1) supporting foundational learning efforts with planning, funding, technical assistance, and policy dialogue; and 2) to identify effective ways to coordinate actions, take stock, and hold each other mutually accountable for progress, including by coordinating efforts on data collection, analysis, and use.

Specific points made include:

- **Forum members should support the development of country-specific foundational learning plans,** including financing, technical assistance, and policy dialogue. It is important that special attention is given to the most marginalized, including refugees, the disabled, and girls. Girls' education is being prioritized in G7 discussions and campaigns of sector funds.
- **Forum members to support and enhance coordinated multi-donor financing mechanisms** (e.g. Education Cannot Wait, World Bank Foundational Learning Compact, Global Partnership for Education, and Education Outcomes Fund) **and explore new financing solutions that can bring additional resources to the table** (e.g. International Finance Facility for Education).
- **Forum members should identify ways to better coordinate activities.** Coordination is needed at three levels: within organizations, between donors, and at the global level. These recommendations are still hard to put into practice and Forum members were invited to propose ways to implement this recommendation.

→ Follow-up Actions

- **Several Forum members will collaborate to support committed governments in creating foundational learning plans, including through platforms such as the Foundational Learning Compact.** Forum members interested in foundational skills and greater coordination across agencies are invited to join this effort.
 - **Further discussions will be needed to assess the ability to create appropriate tracking mechanisms and monitor progress.** As part of the G7, a meeting will be convened to define how to embed girls' education targets into monitoring and accountability processes to track inclusive foundational learning.
 - **Some Forum members called specifically to work together to improve in-country coordination of foundational learning programs.** The modality for this collaboration should be further developed.
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Looking Forward: Discussion of Topics for the Autumn Meeting

EDUCATION WORKFORCE

- **The education workforce should be a key focus of the fourth Forum meeting.** It is critical to rethink the education workforce and ensure it is supported and strengthened to improve the learning of every child. An effective education workforce can be every government's greatest investment and lever for change in national education systems.
- **To develop concrete proposals, technical papers will be prepared to lead the discussion on the education workforce at the Forum's fourth meeting in autumn 2021.** Teachers and other education leaders are critical to operationalize the recommendations of the Forum. The scope of the next meeting includes the education workforce, teacher training, strengthening leadership in schools, current challenges and opportunities, and success countries, among other important topics.

EDUCATION COORDINATION AND COUNTRY PERSPECTIVE

- **The Forum could play a key role as an advocacy platform, convener, and driver of coordination and finance as part of the larger education finance architecture.** There is a need for the international community to unite around a common agenda and priorities guided by evidence.
- **Donor coordination at the country level is key to achieve the Forum objectives.** It was requested that Ghana and Mozambique serve as concrete examples to develop strategies for more effective donor coordination and collaboration at the country level.
- **Forum members called for coordination and alignment with the aid architecture reform process led by UNESCO.** As the UNESCO led working group comes to its conclusion, members called for clarity around the role of the Forum in the aid architecture reform process led by UNESCO and the proposals for the Global Coordination Mechanism.