

Global Education Forum

Proposals for Action for consideration by Forum members at the April 2021 meeting

Background

Recent projections from the IMF predict divergent COVID-19 recovery paths across countries with widening gaps in living standards compared to pre-pandemic expectations. Hard-won gains in poverty reduction have been reversed, with an additional 95 million expected to have entered the ranks of the extreme poor in 2020. Uneven recoveries are also occurring within countries as young and lower-skilled workers are more heavily affected. Moreover, emerging markets and low-income countries are expected to suffer more given their more limited policy and fiscal space. At the same time, countries are also called to build more resilient, inclusive, and greener economies ([IMF, 2021](#)).

Building back better will first and foremost require a steady supply of better skilled workers as well as young people who are able to reach adulthood with the skills necessary to thrive in our 21st century economy and society. The starting point is far from promising. Even before the pandemic, more than half of children in low- and lower-middle-income countries were unable to read at age 10, and an additional 10 percent are likely to fall into learning poverty as a result of the pandemic ([Save Our Future, 2020](#)).

There is simply no recovery possible without adequate and effective investment in education. But a series of recent reports paint a bleak picture in terms of investments in education, especially for the poorest countries. The headline statistics speak for themselves:

- Two-thirds of low- and lower-middle-income countries have cut their education budgets since the onset of the pandemic (compared to only one-third of upper-middle and high-income countries). At the same time, responding to the COVID crisis is requiring countries to spend more to make schools safer, to address learning losses, and to invest in digital and blended learning ([EFW, 2021](#)).
- While overall aid grew in 2020 ([OECD, 2021](#)), most donor countries have understandably shifted their aid allocations to health and other emergency spending. Some estimates predict that aid to education may fall by US\$2 billion and not return to pre-pandemic levels for another 6 years ([UNESCO, 2020](#)).

- Recent estimates of financing gaps in low- and lower-middle-income countries are in the tens of billions.¹ These estimates do not include additional resources needed to invest in digital learning. Existing donor aid (at \$16 billion annually) is only a fraction of what is needed.
- Investments are not generating the results needed. While much greater numbers of children are able to access education, on average, the doubling of government spending per child has led to an increase in learning-adjusted years of schooling (LAYS) – a summary measure of access *and* quality – of only half a year ([Al-Samarrai et al., 2019](#)). Despite disappointing results, support for evidence generation and the use of evidence of “what works” in decision-making has been mixed. Overall funding for global public goods has been relatively low (compared to other sectors).

The International Community Must Act to Avoid a Generational Catastrophe for the World’s Children

Last year, an unprecedented group of multilateral agencies came together to formulate an agenda for the international community to support education in the COVID-19 recovery. This agenda was presented in the [Save Our Future White Paper](#) (Save Our Future, 2020), discussed in the Global Education Forum meeting in September 2020, and included in the [GEM Outcome Declaration](#).

These documents called on international donors to act with urgency to:

- **Support programs in four policy priority 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.
- **Encourage countries’ own resource mobilization and education investment efforts including in the immediate term:** (1) ensuring education is included as an essential sector in COVID-19 response packages; (2) using cash transfer programs to reduce barriers to school re-entry; and (3) maintaining budgets on education and prioritizing spending on vulnerable populations.
- **Make greater efforts to mobilize international resources for education, including in the immediate term:** (1) through targeted aid for education including through issuing SDRs and extending debt relief; (2) fully funding existing multilateral education funding mechanisms; and (3) leveraging additional affordable financing through blended guarantee/loan and grant mechanisms.
- **Increase efforts to improve coordination** (1) at country level through local coordination structures or pooled funding mechanisms; (2) across humanitarian and development spaces and across sectors; and (3) at global level through an agile global architecture – **and to improve effectiveness by investments in data and evidence.**

¹ [UNESCO \(2020\)](#) estimates a shortfall of \$200 billion to deliver on SDG4 primary and secondary education targets by 2030. Others, such as [Theirworld \(2021\)](#), estimate a shortfall of \$75 billion annually, building on earlier estimates by the Education Commission using a trajectory modelled on the pace of the 25% countries that are making the fastest progress.

The Global Education Forum

In these urgent times, the objective of the Global Education Forum is more relevant than ever. **The Forum seeks to foster collaboration and coordination among bilateral and multilateral donors working on global education and to advocate for investment and acceleration of progress towards SDG 4.** If we do not act now to prioritize education and develop concrete ways of working together more effectively as we recover from the pandemic, we risk the loss of opportunity for an entire generation.

Based on the outcomes of the previous Forum meeting in September 2020 and the priorities identified in the COVID-19 recovery packages of the GEM and the Save Our Future White Paper outlined above, **the April 2021 Forum meeting will focus on a selected number of urgent Action Areas for the coming year as schools reopen and countries turn their attention to building back better in education.**

The Action Areas for discussion in this April 2021 meeting include:

- School Health and Nutrition
- Special Topic: Teachers and Vaccination as part of School Reopening
- Foundational Learning
- Digital Learning for All

To facilitate progress on each of these Action Areas, three Forum working groups have been established, led by Forum members (World Food Program for School Health and Nutrition, World Bank for Foundational Learning, and UNICEF for Digital Learning) and including Forum members from bilateral and multilateral donors. The special issue on teachers and vaccination was developed by the Technical Advisory Group of Experts on Educational Institutions and COVID-19, which is co-convened by UNESCO, UNICEF, and the WHO.

The aim of the thematic working groups is to develop concrete proposals for action and build consensus between Forum members on how to move specific themes forward. To support this process, each working group developed an [Action Memo](#) including a statement of the problem, key priorities to build back better, and concrete proposals for multi-agency action.

These proposals are summarized below and presented for consideration at the High-level Forum Meeting in April 2021. Detailed Action Memos with proposals are also included in meeting documentation as Background Documents.

Proposals for Consideration by Forum Members

Drawing on the Action Memos, we call on Forum members to support the following proposals in four Action Areas.

SCHOOL HEALTH AND NUTRITION

The problem. The COVID-19 pandemic brought an end to a decade of global growth in school feeding programs and has sharpened global resolve to restore access to these vital safety nets as a priority. Due to school closures at the height of the crisis, an estimated 370 million children were suddenly deprived of what for many was their main meal of the day. There is clear evidence, guidance, and tools for what needs to be done in school health and nutrition, but this needs to be supported by more deliberate, innovative, and better targeted financing from multiple sectors, including education, health, agriculture, and social protection, with both humanitarian and development goals.

Proposals. The Action Memo asks two things from Ministers of Cooperation and Development from donor countries and leaders of multilateral agencies who are members of the Global Education Forum: 1) commit to advocating for the scale-up of school health and nutrition programs as a key response to the crises caused by the pandemic; 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.

On the advocacy front, the request is twofold:

1. **Work towards common objectives which include:** i) Supporting countries to re-establish effective school feeding and school health programs and repair what was lost during the pandemic; ii) expand access to the most vulnerable, especially the 73 million girls and boys living in extreme poverty and hunger in 60 low- and lower-middle-income countries; and iii) improve the quality and efficiency of school feeding and school health programs everywhere. **Specific advocacy opportunities include the G7, G20, Global Education Summit, Global Food Systems Summit, Nutrition for Growth Summit, and Expo 2020 RewirEd.**
2. **Support the creation of the School Feeding Coalition, to be launched at the United Nations Food Systems Summit in September 2021.** Led by Finland, members of the coalition that is being formed will aim to urgently re-establish, improve, and scale up school feeding programs as a key response to the pandemic and a long-term investment in human capital, stronger and more resilient communities, and more sustainable food systems. **Forum members could play a key role in supporting the creation of the Coalition at the Food Systems Summit, especially with regards to encouraging more innovative approaches to financing (see proposal 3 below).**

On the collaboration and financing front, the request is to:

3. **Establish a multisectoral donor task force for school health and nutrition to rethink the funding mechanisms that help low- and lower-middle-income countries expand, accelerate, and broaden their efforts to build back school-based services.** The Task Force for School Health and Nutrition is not envisioned as a new structure, but as a time-bound, goal-oriented activity. Expanding access to school health and nutrition can be achieved not simply through new resources, but more especially through the efficiency gains from more innovative approaches to financing, including breaking down silos, reducing fragmentation, and promoting synergy across sectors. The Forum stakeholders can help in generating knowledge and data, especially around finance, in support of the development by UNESCO of a new SDG 4 architecture. **Concretely, the task force would (1) within 6 months undertake a landscape analysis of global financing for school health and nutrition programs, and (2) within one year, develop a roadmap exploring options for long-term financing, opportunities for joint and/or coordinated action and funding, and consensus on benchmarks and ground rules.**

Further details on the proposals can be found in [Background Document 1 – School Health and Nutrition Action Memo](#).

TEACHERS AND VACCINATION AS PART OF SCHOOL REOPENING

The problem. The COVID-19 pandemic has strongly reminded us that teachers, through their presence in classrooms, not only educate learners but play a lynchpin role in the well-being and prosperity of the community. The world witnessed firsthand the knock-on effects that school closures have had, severing crucial linkages with social protection services that safeguard our most vulnerable young people, disadvantaging learners and families with special needs, and undermining the overall health and well-being of children and young people. In sum, supporting countries to take the necessary measures to protect teachers and facilitate their safe return to the classroom is a public good, a critical part of each country's social and economic recovery from COVID-19, and an urgent priority. Based on the latest data available, 111 of the 168 countries surveyed have officially prioritized teachers in vaccinations. Of these 111 countries, only 19 acknowledge that they count teachers as a priority population for the first phase of their national vaccination plans. UNESCO, UNICEF, and other partners continue to advocate for more countries to prioritize teachers as part of the first phase of their national vaccination plans.

Proposals. Three proposals for action are put forward for consideration by Forum members. They aim to mobilize support for teachers for accelerated recovery in the education system, including their prioritization for COVID-19 vaccination consistent with the epidemiologic setting and vaccine supply scenarios.

- 1. Increase funding for countries to implement recommended international guidance for safe school reopening, 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](#).** International guidance has been developed to help decision-makers and planners take all possible measures to help keep teachers (and students) safe when schools are opened. The capacity of national education sectors to adequately implement the recommended measures varies by context, with some low- and lower-middle-income countries struggling due to lack of resources, inadequate infrastructure including WASH facilities, and supply shortages.
- 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.** Vaccinating teachers is an important complementary measure which will help keep them safe from community transmission of the virus. It is the only global initiative that is working with governments and manufacturers to ensure COVID-19 vaccines are available worldwide to both higher-income and lower-income countries. As of April 14, 2021, 113 countries and territories have received their first dose shipments, with close to 40 million doses delivered. Countries such as Cambodia, Viet Nam, The Gambia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Afghanistan are among the low- and middle-income countries that have decided to prioritize teachers in their vaccination campaigns.
- 3. Join calls for teachers to be supported and prioritized for vaccination as essential workers, fully aligned with the SAGE Roadmap. In November 2020, based on the [WHO SAGE values framework for the allocation and prioritization of COVID-19 vaccination](#), WHO SAGE released a [Roadmap for prioritizing uses of COVID-19 vaccines in the context of limited supply](#).** The document highlights several epidemiologic and vaccine supply scenarios, and implications for prioritizing teachers in national vaccination efforts. Within the community transmission epidemiologic scenario, teachers and other adult

staff employed in school settings are prioritized along with other frontline workers to continue the functioning of essential services including schools.

Further details on the proposals can be found in [Background Document 2 – Teachers and Vaccination as Part of School Reopening Action Memo](#).

FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

The problem. More than half of children in low- and lower-middle-income countries do not master basic reading and math or reach SDG minimum proficiency targets by age 10. This astonishing statistic originates in a failure in the foundational grades (grades 1, 2, and 3). Most observers and even donor and government participants in the education sector do not realize how dire and deep the learning problem is.

Achieving at least minimum proficiency levels of foundational learning, as measured by SDG 4.1.1(a) is an attainable goal, even in low-resource contexts and in conflict and crisis-affected contexts. However, achieving these learning levels will require new approaches to education sector development, along with strong commitment, focus, and coordination between governments and donors. This is especially true given the need to recover and accelerate learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the pandemic will be felt the most by marginalized populations such as the disabled, refugees, girls, and the poorest, especially the many families that do not have access to online instruction or learning materials in their homes, who will need additional support to address COVID-related learning loss.

With the timeline for action on the SDGs narrowing, the Forum is well-positioned to champion the emerging prioritization of foundational learning across the multilaterals, bilaterals, foundations, and INGOs in support of governments. By looking at just a few of the larger agencies, it is clear that some prioritization is emerging, but it must be coordinated in order to maximize its impact and accelerate progress. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of various partners in the Forum over the past ten years, there are many experiences to learn from and capitalize on. Proposals to prioritize foundational learning do not imply that other areas should be neglected. However, crucially, it is essential to recognize that foundational learning is a necessary condition for achieving almost all educational and economic goals. Leadership, creativity, and drive need to focus on this critical SDG goal.

Proposals. Two sets of proposals, one for action and the other for coordination, are put forward for Forum members' consideration.

1. Take action by supporting foundational learning efforts with planning, funding, technical assistance, and policy dialogue.

Specifically, Forum members are asked to consider the following:

- **By December 2021, as an initial effort, start to support at least five committed countries in developing clear, prioritized, costed, and evidence-based plans for foundational learning.** These should be aligned around clear learning targets, adapted appropriately to context, and anchored in government systems. They should incorporate the lessons of the past ten years as outlined in the Action Memo and be broadly consistent with various agency documents (USAID's *Reading Matters*, UNICEF's FLN initiative, the World Bank's Literacy Policy Package, GEEAP's *Smart Buys*, etc.). They should also take into account the most marginalized children – including children with disabilities, girls, refugee children outside of the national system, and ethnic minorities. Building on this initial effort, the ambition should be scaled rapidly to include all countries with significant learning poverty.

- **Within a year, fund at least five countries to implement the foundational learning plans and develop a coordinated support strategy (including multilateral platforms or coordinated country-level funding efforts) to mobilize additional funding for foundational learning.** This could include support to multi-agency efforts to conduct unified regular public expenditure reviews of education and funding flow studies (with a strong focus on foundational learning) and proposing actions for mid- to long-term financing plans to address identified financing gaps for foundational learning. **Again, building on this initial effort, the ambition should be scaled to ensure that countries with the plans and political commitment to improve foundational learning receive adequate and coordinated international support to meet their objectives.**
 - **Ensure that every foundational learning intervention has an evaluation and learning strategy that includes assessment of baseline, midline, and endline outcomes.** Ensure that this measurement is consistent and shared publicly. Without this it will be impossible to do the *timely* tracking needed as proposed below.
2. **Identify effective ways to coordinate actions, take stock, and hold each other mutually accountable for progress.**

Specifically, Forum members are asked to consider the following:

- **Identify and implement mechanisms to ensure more effective coordination.** At a minimum this should be ensured (1) between headquarters and field offices, (2) between partners and with the country at the country level, and (3) between donors at the global level (e.g. in developing global public goods, pooled funding instruments, etc.)
- **Develop a tracking mechanism to measure progress on coordination of efforts in support of foundational learning.** Commit to take stock regularly of outcomes, commitments, funding, and actions of Forum members on foundational learning. Concretely, this would involve the **development of the tracking tool (by September 2021) and a foundational learning stock-take report (by April 2022) highlighting where progress has been made and where it is stalling**, possibly including a list of additional countries that could be supported to develop foundational learning plans.
- **Coordinate efforts on data collection, analysis, and use of data. Identify options to jointly support the collection, analysis, and use of open data for measuring and reporting on learning for SDG 4.1.1.a and b, as a means to spur action and track progress on foundational learning.** This includes supporting government and civil society institutions that are innovating and piloting methods at the national and global level for data collection, use, and dissemination. This may also include the establishment of a dedicated fund or brokerage for financing learning data collection and analysis. The recent establishment of the Global Proficiency Framework should enable multiple routes to this shared goal.

Further details on the proposals can be found in [Background Document 3 – Foundational Learning Action Memo](#).

DIGITAL LEARNING

The problem. Digital learning has never been more prominent than in the last year, as millions of children have had their classroom experiences disrupted by COVID-19, and education systems worldwide have turned to remote instruction. Despite this attention, digital solutions remain poorly understood, and evidence for the

most effective approaches to technology-enabled learning has often been ignored. As schools closed due to the pandemic, fewer than 25 percent of low-income countries and 65 percent of lower-middle-income countries were able to immediately set up remote learning platforms due to lack of effective policies, access to devices, or connectivity. The successful adoption of technology in education has also been hampered by countries' inability to concurrently invest in different elements of the broader digital transformation ecosystem. Cultivating the broader ecosystem for digital transformation requires a multi-year roadmap with great intentionality on ensuring that the ecosystem is conducive to partnerships. Additional financing for the development of effective ecosystems is also urgently needed.

Harnessing *quality* digital learning will be a key element in many countries' strategies to build back better from COVID-19. This will require a focus on marginalized learners, planning, and collaboration across sectors, consideration of connectivity and complementary investments, and matching financing to expansion plans. There is also an important opportunity to scale access to Open Educational Resources as a central element in countries' digital expansion strategies.

Proposals. Four proposals for action have been developed for consideration by Forum members.

1. Work towards and advocate for common objectives with a focus on those furthest behind.

There is an urgent need to establish common definitions and digital learning expansion targets that: (1) enable all children to learn right now using no-tech, non-digital (e.g. radio and TV), and low-tech digital approaches but (2) offer an evolutionary passage and pathway towards wider use of quality digital learning. Targets could build on the targets set by the UNICEF-World Bank partnership to Connect Every Child to Learning Everywhere.

It is therefore proposed that Forum members work together with each other and countries to help formulate and jointly advocate for digital learning targets for low- and lower-middle-income countries, recognizing the potential of different types of education technology solutions and the gradual introduction of quality digital learning solutions with a focus on those most left behind.

2. Support countries in developing plans for the expansion and financing of digital learning.

Digital learning expansion planning must be an inter-sectoral effort. The development and implementation of plans, which should include details on short-term and long-term financing, must be supported by international donors and provide a basis for more effective donor coordination.

It is therefore proposed that:

- **By September 2021, Forum members identify and/or start to support 10 countries to develop digital learning expansion plans.** Where relevant, these efforts should be linked to the development of education sector plans for GPE to avoid duplication and inconsistencies. If successful, a target for additional countries could be added every six months with reporting back to the Forum.
- **By December 2021, Forum members identify ways to better coordinate and avoid duplication of donor efforts and investments at country and global levels.** Financing sources and instruments should be matched to digital expansion plans at the country and global levels. At the country level, digital expansion plans and education sector plans should clearly lay out needed investments and anticipated financing, and sectoral review missions should monitor plans and their implementation systematically.

- **By April 2022, Forum members establish a common set of principles and minimum quality standards to fund digital learning and develop monitoring mechanism to assess coordination and progress.** This could include: (1) developing a set of minimum quality standards for funding digital initiatives that can enhance coherence and coordination of investments; (2) agreeing on common guidelines to monitor coordination on digital learning across sector planning processes; (3) developing digital transformation markers for financial tracking.

3. Develop a long-term global investment and support strategy that is adaptive to country needs

There is an urgent need for a global sustainable investment and support strategy that is adaptive and flexible enough to meet the specific needs of countries and the portfolio of instruments available within country contexts. This strategy should have a continued focus on the most marginalized and the poorest countries. It is therefore proposed that:

- **By September 2021, Forum members are asked to engage with and support the Broadband Commission ([Digital Learning](#) and [21st Century Financing Models Working Groups](#)) to deliver reports that map the components of the digital learning ecosystem, potential funding sources, and instruments for financing in developing countries.** This should also include an assessment of whether costs are one-off or longer term and guidance as to where the funding should be put as a priority to ensure inclusivity and what could be funded by domestic (including potential greater use of Universal Service Funds), private sector, etc. The outcome report will also include a set of recommendations for different stakeholders including private sector, policymakers, and INGOs.
- **By December 2021, Forum members are asked to consider:**
 - **Supporting the Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education led by UNESCO.** The Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education aims to mobilize commitment among Member States and the private sector to advance connectivity in support of the right to education. The Declaration is set to be launched at Expo 2020 RewirEd.
 - **Jointly developing a global financing strategy and using Expo2020 RewirEd as a key moment to mobilize additional resources for digital learning, including from private and public sectors.** Forum members could work together to determine what financial support strategies for countries may be feasible. Financing instruments to mobilize additional financing may include, but not be limited to, guarantee mechanisms and advanced market commitments.

4. A special initiative on Open Educational Resources (OER) to improve access to digital learning tools in the short term

To ensure that every child worldwide has the resources they need to learn effectively right now, it is recommended to consider provision of OER into national systems of education, where appropriate. There are unexplored synergies and economies of scale linked to the development of high-quality curriculum resources that offer strong value for money. Further, OER provide learners and teachers with content in local languages and tailored to the right level, an evidence-based way to improve learning.

It is therefore proposed that:

- **By December 2021, as part of the global investment strategy, Forum members commit funding for the development of a high-quality set of OER in relevant languages.** These resources need to meet a rigorous set of accessibility standards and cover priority subjects including language, mathematics, global

citizenship, and digital skills for higher grades. The resources need to (1) align with and (2) cover national curricula, so that they are viable for national use.

- **By April 2022, Forum members identify and/or start to support 10 countries to roll out digital curriculum management practices at the ministry level and leverage the above set of OER.** The support offered by donors can encourage the integration and uptake of these resources into national curricula. In particular, facilitating resource discovery through appropriate categorization and meta-data tagging can maximize the usability of OER. Further support to ensure that resources are adaptable can increase their longevity and continued usage.

Further details on the proposals can be found in [Background Document 4 – Digital Learning Action Memo](#).