

The SDG4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee's contribution to the 2022 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (2022 HLPF)

“Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”

1. Introduction: the SDG 4-Education 2030 agenda

The vision of the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) as embodied in the Education 2030 Framework for Action is to transform lives through quality education, recognizing the critical role of education as a main driver of development and in achieving the remaining 16 SDGs¹.

Education is a human right. It is also a means to realize other rights and contributes to gender equality, poverty reduction and building prosperous, resilient economies and peaceful, stable societies while empowering children, youth and adults to realize their full potential and to participate in society. SDG 4 and its targets are inspired by a humanistic vision of education and development based on human rights and dignity; social justice; protection; individual and collective autonomy; cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity; and shared responsibility and accountability. Inclusion, equity and gender equality in and through education (SDG 5) is the cornerstone of SDG 4's transformative education agenda.

The SDG 4-Education 2030 commitment promotes inclusive and equitable quality *lifelong learning* opportunities for all, in all settings and at all levels of education from early childhood to adulthood. As such, SDG 4 has links across the 2030 Agenda as an enabler for the other SDGs and harnessing human ingenuity to address challenges like inequalities within and among countries (SDG 10), climate change (SDG 13), rapidly changing labour markets with increased digitization and greening economies (SDG 8) and peace building (SDG 16).

SDG 4 encompasses the acquisition of foundational skills in literacy and numeracy; analytical, problem-solving and other high-level cognitive, interpersonal and social skills; and skills, values and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives (SDG 3), make informed decisions, and respond to local and global challenges such as ocean protection (SDG 14) and biodiversity loss (SDG 15) through education for sustainable development (ESD). Global citizenship education (GCED) can also help to build peaceful societies and solidarity around the 2030 Agenda and to advance partnerships (SDGs 16 and 17).

The pre-pandemic world was already seriously off track to deliver on the SDG 4 - Education 2030 commitments with 260 million children and youth out of school² and 53% of children in low- and middle-income countries could not read and understand a simple story by the end of primary education.³ Adult literacy rates were steadily growing, but 750 million youth and adults still lacked basic literacy skills. Alarmed by the learning crisis and the persisting inequalities in the access to, quality and outcomes of education, the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee put forward a set of concrete policy recommendations to the 2019 HLPF, calling for transformation, innovation and partnership, political responsibility and commitment to encourage the international community to move⁴:

- Beyond averages: to leave no one behind
- Beyond access: to ensure relevant learning outcomes

- Beyond basics: to diversify and broaden the contents of education
- Beyond schooling: to lifelong and lifewide (across multiple learning spaces) learning
- Beyond education: to expand multi-sectoral planning
- Beyond countries: to foster peer learning mechanisms.

2. Progress, challenges, lessons learned and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on SDG 4

The COVID-19 pandemic—the worst disruptor to education in recent history—has been in fact a crisis within a crisis, exacerbating the pre-existing educational inequalities and learning crisis. As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, governments began responding in March 2020 with nationwide shutdowns to limit virus transmission, resulting in nearly universal **school closures**. The temporary closure of schools affected more than 90 per cent (some 1.6 billion) of learners globally at the peak of the pandemic, including nearly 369 million children who rely on school meals for daily nutrition. As of this writing, the third consecutive year of learning is disrupted, with over 43 million learners still being affected by school closures across the world and schools are fully shut down in six countries due to COVID-19.⁵

In 2020 alone, schools were on average fully closed for 79 instruction days from pre-primary through upper-secondary levels, representing roughly 40% of total instructional days averaged across OECD and G20 countries⁶. In the most extreme cases schools have remained closed for over a year⁷. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on lower-income countries and marginalized populations was also evident in education as the abilities to offer remote learning and safely reopen schools to minimize learning disruptions largely depended on countries' financial and infrastructural conditions. High-income countries were able to safely reopen schools sooner with the average duration of full school closure of 53 days whereas full school closure lasted on average 115 days in lower-middle-income countries and 88 days in low-income countries⁸.

By the end of 2021, stark differences between countries and regions have emerged in terms of the percentage of instruction days when schools were fully or partially closed. Between March 2020 and October 2021, Latin America and the Caribbean was the region where schools remained closed longest (75%), followed by Northern Africa and Western Asia (69%). Oceania was the region where schools remained open the longest with an average of 15% of regular instruction days disrupted, followed by sub-Saharan Africa (43%) and Europe and Northern America (47%)⁹. This shows, both how differently the pandemic has affected countries and regions, as well as their diverse capacities to cope with it.

Governments around the world mobilized various **remote learning solutions** to ensure learning continuity, including through mobile phones, digital online platforms, broadcast media such as TV and radio, and paper-based take-home materials; and most deployed a variety of them. The international community, including through the Global Education Coalition, provided innovative learning solutions including low-tech content in an attempt to mitigate digital exclusion and learning losses^{10,11}. Among these solutions, broadcast media were more popular in low-income countries (92%) than high-income countries (25%). On the other hand, 96% of high-income countries provided remote learning through online platforms for at least one education level compared to only 58% of low-income countries¹². Globally, 1.3 billion (or more than two thirds) of school-age girls and boys aged 3 to 17 and almost 760 million young people (or 63%) aged 15 to 24 lack internet access at home.¹³ The school closures elucidated the world's digital divide, placing a severe burden on education systems to urgently design, create and implement remote learning platforms and programmes, materials and training mechanisms for teachers and school staff. In particular, teachers and other education personnel have been put under significant pressure to switch to teaching and supporting children remotely or through blended approaches. Their income and job security concerns have increased, especially among contract teachers and support personnel in the private sector. In many contexts, school closures have led to furloughs or separations¹⁴.

Looking at different levels of education, despite decades of evidence that demonstrate the benefits of early childhood care and education for subsequent learning and economic returns, as well as reducing inequalities in education, pre-primary level was often left out of remote learning and least likely to be prioritized for reopening¹⁵. Even when remote teaching was offered, it was challenging—and developmentally inappropriate—to engage for an extended period pre-primary-age children who have less developed self-regulation skills and sustained attention. Moreover, as young children thrive through human interactions, the lack of such social and cognitive stimuli outside their homes may have lasting impact on their health, development and learning.¹⁶

UNESCO’s global survey on higher education shows that university teaching and research activities were also disrupted or even cancelled due to the pandemic and there has been a major increase in online education with hybrid mode of teaching being most popular.¹⁷ The impact of COVID-19 on enrolment varies by regions and income levels with high-income countries and those in Europe and North America were better able to cope with the disruption due to government funding support and increase in domestic enrolment. International mobility, on the other hand, took a major hit, affecting international students significantly even when they were provided with online teaching. The survey also reports the increased difficulty in transiting from higher education to the labour market due to reduced job opportunities, while employers seek applicants with higher technology skills.

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) was also severely affected by the pandemic, which disrupted work-based practical learning—up to 98% according to a global survey conducted in May 2020—which need to be acquired in person¹⁸. Although many TVET providers switched to remote learning, they struggled to deliver some of the key features of TVET, namely, the acquisition of practical skills and work-based learning. Unemployment is affecting youth in particular and the transition from school to work is disrupted by sluggish economies and changing labour markets. Globally, youth employment fell by 8.7% in 2020 compared with 3.7% for older adults¹⁹. In 2019, some 267 million young people (15–24 years old) were not in education, employment or training (NEET), two thirds of whom are young women as a result of gendered expectations of unpaid family work and informal employment²⁰. The NEET rate of young people has risen in many countries and has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels in most cases²¹.

The full picture of the **impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SDG 4** is yet to be shown with official SDG 4 statistics, which themselves were impacted and delayed due to the pandemic. Available global studies are based on simulations and most country-level studies in the COVID-context have been conducted in high-income countries. They generally show negative yet heterogeneous effects, depending on contexts, educational levels and academic subjects²².

Emerging evidence on the uptake and effectiveness of remote learning solutions during COVID-19 is mixed at best. UNICEF’s research from South Asia has also revealed that even children with access to devices and connectivity lacked regular contact with teachers and learning opportunities during school closures.²³ According to a World Bank study (2021),²⁴ learning outcomes of remote learning during the pandemic have been generally worse than in-person learning prior to the pandemic, although the findings are nuanced depending on contexts. In terms of uptake, learners in low-income countries did not take part as much in remote learning as in middle-income countries while uptake was not as much of an issue in high-income countries. Even in high-income contexts, however, the swift move to remote learning proved a major challenge for both teachers and learners and evidence suggests that the remote modalities did not facilitate learning as much as in-person learning. The study concludes that for remote learning to be effective it requires three complementary, critical components: effective teachers, suitable technology and engaged learners.

Millions of learners are expected to have dropped out during the pandemic and never return to school.²⁵ The “**learning loss**,” defined as “any loss of knowledge or skills and/or deceleration of

interruption to academic progress most commonly due to extended gaps or discontinuities in a student's education" (World Bank, et. al. 2021, p.11),²⁶ is projected to rise sharply due to the prolonged school closures and the uneven uptake and effectiveness of remote learning. As a result, the proportion of children who cannot read and understand a simple story by the end of primary education in low- and middle-income countries is projected to rise from the pre-pandemic 53% to 67% or even 70% in the most pessimistic scenario²⁷. Under this pessimistic scenario, this generation of learners could lose up to \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings at present value, which is equivalent to 14% of today's global GDP. A larger share of losses is expected to have taken place in middle-income countries because their reported school closures have been longer than those in high- and low-income countries²⁸.

Beyond learning loss, the pandemic (including both during school closures and since schools have reopened) has had an effect on both **learners' and teachers' health and well-being**. There has been an increase in children's depression and anxiety levels, reductions in physical activity and increased unhealthy behaviours.^{29 30 31} In a survey of education systems of eleven countries across five regions, UNESCO and IEA found that 50% of secondary school students felt overwhelmed. At the same time teachers reported an increase in their workload and significant changes to their work and job expectations.³² In the case of these countries, school systems responded by enhancing efforts to provide support and resources to school staff and students. Teachers and students responded to this survey that they felt supported by their school leadership.³³

Two years into the COVID-19 crisis, critical lessons are emerging.³⁴³⁵ First, education systems must build resiliency and plan for learning continuity between the school and the home environment. This also means improving the home learning environment and the educational infrastructure, including digital transformation of education systems, connectivity and access to learning materials and devices, digital skills as well as the capacity and support of parents, caregivers and communities. Second, education takes place through social interactions and teachers play the critical role in supporting student learning in the classroom, remotely and through blended approaches. Therefore, teachers need to be trained and qualified, receive continuous professional development, empowered with digital skills and be supported, including through decent working conditions and adequate remuneration. Finally, to build resilient and inclusive education systems, countries must prioritize education in their stimulus package and invest in the support structures needed to ensure teaching and learning that is effective and inclusive of all learners, especially girls, those with disabilities, ethnic or linguistic minorities and displaced populations. Education is an investment that requires sustainable funding, and the Paris Declaration of the 2021 Global Education Meeting³⁶ urges all governments to increase resources for education and use these resources effectively to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

3. Assessment of the situation regarding the principle of "leaving no one behind"

While the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every country, community and family, the crisis and its direct result of widespread school closures have been exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, affecting disproportionately vulnerable communities and learners, especially those living in poverty, women and girls, those impacted by crises and conflicts, ethnolinguistic minorities, and persons with disabilities³⁷. As mentioned above, existing inequalities among countries have manifested themselves in their capacities to ensure learning continuity through remote learning and to reopen schools safely: schools have remained closed for longer in poorer countries and the lack of adequate infrastructure coupled with the digital divide meant lower-income countries struggled to shift to remote learning.

Inequality within countries is a major challenge as the disadvantaged tend to have lower access to devices and internet, and fewer digital skills as well as home environments that may encumber learning, such as less parental support, limited literacy and/or differing home and tuition languages, domestic and care obligations, and risks related to child labour and child marriage. UNICEF (2020)

estimates that *at least* 463 million children could not be reached by digital and broadcast remote learning programmes during school closures, with three out of four unreached students coming from **rural areas and/or poor households**³⁸. In addition to the unequal access to remote learning, **learners with disabilities** faced an additional barrier to accessing its content due to the lack of sign languages, braille, closed captions, etc. A global survey by the World Bank (2021) indicates that only 19% of teachers felt that their students with disabilities were continuing to learn during the school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and more than twice as many (40 percent) believed they did not³⁹. When reopening schools, many countries prioritized older students and exam-year students, but some prioritized the most vulnerable students. For example, schools in Norway remained open for students with disabilities, students facing risks at home and students whose parents are essential workers. In Uruguay, schools were reopened first for rural communities and vulnerable student populations.⁴⁰

In some countries, **gender** norms and expectations have reduced girls' access to devices and internet and in poorer contexts, increased household chores for girls also constrained their time to learn and benefit from remote learning. Boys' learning time, on the other hand, tended to be reduced by their income-generating activities to support their families⁴¹. School closures have negative effects beyond learning, especially for the most disadvantaged children in lower-income countries, and in particular adolescent girls. Protection from gender-based violence, child marriage and child labour as well as prevention of early pregnancy and school dropouts have been major concerns from the onset of the COVID-19 educational crisis, particularly in emergency contexts.⁴² Gathering evidence on these sensitive issues during the acute pandemic is challenging; yet it is critical to continue to pay attention to them. On the other hand, promising approaches to mitigate the effects of school closures on girls' learning and return to school have been documented. Several countries carried out awareness campaigns around girls' risks of gender-based violence and set up hotlines for children and young people to receive mental health support and to report gender-based violence, domestic violence, and child, early or forced marriage⁴³. Cash transfers and the elimination of school-related fees emerged as particularly promising for girls to return to school, which should be accompanied with advocacy and community mobilization to support their re-enrolment⁴⁴.

Prior to the pandemic in 2019, 127 million primary and secondary school-age children and young people living in **crisis-affected countries** were out of school—almost one-half the global out-of-school population.⁴⁵ Girls were more likely than boys to be out of school in crisis contexts.⁴⁶ Forced displacement and migration events have become larger in scale and greater in length over time, leaving the right to education of millions of children and young people at stake. COVID-19 exacerbated this trend. Although the exact number of refugees affected by the pandemic is not yet available, existing educational disadvantages faced by refugee children have only worsened due to the acute economic and social disruption brought about by the pandemic.⁴⁷ Moreover, the pandemic negatively affected girls' access to education in more acute and longer-lasting ways than boys—it is estimated that half of refugee girls enrolled in secondary school before COVID-19 will not return due to such lasting consequences.⁴⁸ On the financial front, only 8% of education needs in the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan for 2020 was funded, which severely limited efforts to education for children and young people affected by conflicts,⁴⁹ with less than 3% of humanitarian aid dedicated to the education sector.⁵⁰

4. Actions and policy recommendations in areas requiring urgent attention in implementing SDG 4 and the 2030 Agenda

a) *Inclusive, equitable, safe and healthy schools*

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the global community has joined forces to advocate for education as a key response to the crisis and create multi-sectoral partnerships to support countries to ensure learning continuity, with a view to avoiding what the UN Secretary-General called a “general catastrophe”. However, in the shadow of the pandemic, new conflicts arise, further undermining the

continuity of education and putting at risk the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda. The cost of school closures is shown to be steep, far reaching and potentially long-lasting, with pre-existing inequalities exacerbated and countries' progress towards the 2030 Agenda at risk. Therefore, **safely reopening schools and educational institutions and keeping them open should be the highest priority**⁵¹. This includes the introduction of measures to reduce virus transmission in schools and the recovery of comprehensive essential services, including school meals, hygiene, protection and psychosocial support. An integrated approach to learning environments—health, gender, school nutrition, social protection, psychosocial support, etc.—is essential to inclusive recovery and educational inclusion of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups as highlighted in the 2020 Global Education Meeting Declaration⁵².

As children and youth return to in-person learning, it is recommended that countries carry out **back-to-school campaigns** for learners at risk of dropping out or being left behind in learning, and adopt a **learning recovery programme** based on the “three policy levers to accelerate learning recovery”: consolidating the curriculum in line with students' learning levels and with emphasis on foundational learning and socioemotional competencies; extending instructional time; and improving the efficiency of learning through, for example, targeted instruction, structured pedagogy and small-group tutoring⁵³. These measures should also support learners who were out of school prior to the pandemic, recalling that in the pre-pandemic world 260 million children of primary and secondary school age were not in school. In this sense, inclusive and flexible pedagogical approach including **flexible learning pathways** are essential to support the vulnerable and marginalized groups of learners. For children, youth and families affected by conflict situations and disasters, education protects their lives and sustains their livelihoods. Thus, protecting and prioritizing education is crucial for their recovery and resilience.

b) Learning and skills for life, work and sustainable development

Technological development, migration, climate change, conflicts and epidemics are reshaping society and changing the landscape of **learning and skills development for enhanced employability and sustainable development, particularly for young people**. Young people and adults need continuous reskilling and upskilling for rapidly changing labour markets with increased digitization and greening economies. To support transition from school to work, governments need to expand skills development opportunities including foundational, transferable, digital, entrepreneurial and job-specific through multiple pathways including formal and non-formal education system including TVET and digital learning. While governments are called on to play a larger role in reforming TVET systems especially for digital skills acquisition, this is an area in which collaboration with non-state actors should be further leveraged. Young people themselves should play an active and meaningful role as decision- and change-makers. All learners from early childhood through adulthood not only need relevant knowledge and skills to address the interconnected global challenges but also are empowered to take action and contribute to global peace, democracy, sustainable development, and socially just green transformation. Education for sustainable development, including climate change education, is essential for today's learners. It is also vital to promote media and information literacy to facilitate critical thinking skills that are key for resilience and informed decision-making.

c) Teaching, teachers and the teaching profession

The key role that **teachers** play in students' smooth return to school, learning recovery and well-being cannot be emphasized enough. Strengthening their pedagogical skills, including digital skills and socio-emotional learning instruction, and ensuring their own safety, well-being and decent working conditions are essential and urgent. Dialogue with teachers and their representative organizations is key for identifying and implementing the appropriate measures and ensuring equity and quality in education. The pandemic has also shown the importance of the home learning environment and the school-home continuity in case of school closures or disruptions. Governments should, through an inter-sectoral and integrated approach, inform, support and guide families and communities to

facilitate children and young people's learning, health and well-being at home, including through the provision of learning/reading materials and training of caregivers in vulnerable and disadvantaged contexts.

d) Digital learning and transformation

Connected technology has a tremendous potential to ensure learning continuity and enrich learning processes, and the online teaching and learning deployed around the world during the pandemic reveals new possibilities to accelerate progress towards SDG 4 through digital learning and transformation of education. On the other hand, the digital divide and the uneven quality of remote learning exacerbated educational inequalities. Moreover, the past two years reaffirmed that teachers are the backbone of every education system and inclusive digital technologies should aim to support – and not replace – them. Teachers should, thus, play an essential role in the choice and adaptation of digital technologies, and privacy and data protection must be ensured for learners and teachers. Guiding families, parents and caregivers in digital technology may also be needed to facilitate children's digital learning at home when in-person schooling is disrupted. Inclusive, equitable and sustainable approaches to digital technologies as well as safe and productive use of online learning are a key strategy for educational recovery and resilience and for the future of education and learning. In this regard, the RewirEd Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education presents concrete actions for all stakeholders to pursue under three core principles: centre on the most marginalized, expand investments in free and high-quality digital education content, and move education to digital spaces through pedagogical innovation and change.⁵⁴

e) Financing of education

Prior to 2020, the **financing** shortfall in low- and lower-middle income countries for achieving SDG 4 was estimated to be around \$148 billion per year.⁵⁵ The pandemic is expected to have had a significant effect on this annual financing gap, which can rise to approximately \$200 billion per year if no action is taken,⁵⁶ but these countries allocated less than 1% of their COVID-19 stimulus package to education.⁵⁷ Globally, education was not a priority in much of the governments' fiscal responses with only 2.9 % of COVID-19 stimulus package funding worldwide went to education and this is concentrated in high-income countries (97% of education funding provided as part of COVID-19 stimulus package worldwide)⁵⁸.

In light of this global education crisis, the leaders of governments, the global education community, and student, youth and teacher representatives adopted the *Paris Declaration: A Global Call for Investing in the Futures of Education* at the Global Education Meeting in November 2021. The declaration urges all governments to develop strategies to **increase domestic resources for education and use these resources effectively** to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, including by allocating at least 4-6% of GDP and/or at least 15-20% of total public expenditure to education and raise more revenues to increase education budgets. Governments are also urged to invest in key policy priorities for recovery and accelerated progress towards SDG 4, such as inclusive and equitable quality early childhood care and education, teachers' training and professional development, youth employability skills and digital transformation of the education sector.⁵⁹ Donors of international aid are reminded of the past commitment to **increase the volume, predictability and effectiveness of international aid to education**. A special attention should be paid to education for crisis-affected learners as education remains severely underfunded in crisis situations where less than 3% of humanitarian aid is given to education.

5. Key messages for inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of the 2022 HLPF

Key message 1: Reopen schools safely and address educational recovery and resilience

In recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, safely reopening schools and educational institutions, keeping them open and ensuring students are learning is the highest priority for all countries. It is

urgent to address learners' re-enrolment, recovery of lost learning, and well-being, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized groups and those at risk of dropping out, including those affected by conflicts and crises and learners with disabilities, through an integrated, multi-sectoral approach.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the loss of 6 million human lives to date, severely damaged livelihoods and well-being, and exacerbated poverty and inequalities. Socioeconomic inequalities within and across countries, gender inequality and educational inequalities, including unequal access to remote learning opportunities, have reinforced one another, leaving the disadvantaged and marginalized groups further behind. Unless we act now, we risk losing millions of children and young people, particularly girls and women, who will never come back to school. We witnessed a wide range of damages that school closures caused to learning and well-being of learners and the educational personnel, particularly those in vulnerable and marginalized situations. Schools and educational institutions, therefore, should be the last to close and the first to reopen, while minimizing transmission risks and maximizing learning recovery and restoration of basic services.

“Resiliency” has become the key word in recovering from the COVID-19 crisis and education holds that key. We must build more resilient, flexible, inclusive and gender-transformative societies and education systems. To leave no one behind, societies and education systems need to be prepared for and resilient against the changing climate, increasing natural disasters and emerging crises and conflicts – local or cross-border. We must also address the holistic needs of all learners from early childhood to adulthood, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, and address the education emergency of those affected by conflicts and crises and to do so, contextualized, integrated, multi-sectoral collaboration is essential.

Key message 2: Reimagine education and renew our commitment

Education is a human right and enabler of other human rights and sustainable development. In accelerating progress towards SDG 4 and the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, governments and the global community need to commit to and jointly act on transforming education with focus on the following thematic focus areas agreed on by the SDG4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee: a) Inclusive, equitable, safe and healthy schools; b) Learning and skills for life, work and sustainable development; c) Teaching, teachers and the teaching profession; and d) Digital learning and transformation.

The existing education crisis and inequalities, the historical educational disruptions caused by the pandemic, as well as the climate crisis and widespread conflicts have led us to rethink and reimagine the purpose, content and delivery of education, that is, to transform education toward peaceful, inclusive and sustainable presents and futures of humanity and the planet. The Report of the International Commission for the Futures of Education, *Reimagining our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, convened by UNESCO, invites governments and citizens around the world to forge a new social contract for education, governed by the two foundational principles: assuring the right to quality education throughout life and strengthening education as a public endeavour and a common good. Affirming education as the primary responsibility of the state, we need a new social contract and renewed commitment to global collaboration and cooperation among state and non-state actors for education.

Drawing on this report, the Secretary-General proposed in his *Our Common Agenda* the Transforming Education Summit to be held in September 2022, which will provide an opportunity to forge alliances around thematic focus areas and education finance to advance SDG 4 and the 2030 Agenda. In this context, the SDG 4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee agreed on the four thematic focus areas to mobilize joint initiatives and cooperation to support countries in accelerating towards the SDG 4-Education 2030 agenda.

Key message 3: Invest in resilient education systems

Education is an investment that requires sustainable funding. Governments should invest in education as a key response to recover from the COVID-19 crisis and to build resilient, inclusive, gender-transformative and innovative societies. At the core is the need to ensure adequate and sustainable resources for education, improve spending efficiency and promote the equitable use of public resources. Complementary financing mechanisms, including international aid, support from civil society and philanthropies, and innovative financing sources, must align with country priorities and investment needs, reinforcing a focus on transformative outcomes. To this end, we must strengthen our global cooperation in education, through the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism, to advocate for, ensure and monitor the efficient and effective delivery on the political and financial commitments made by governments and the global community.

Through the 2020 Global Education Meeting (GEM) Declaration and the 2021 GEM Paris Declaration, governments and the global education community committed to protect, increase and make efficient use of domestic and international education finance, and to implement priority actions to accelerate progress towards SDG 4 in the COVID-19 context and beyond. We must maintain the sense of urgency to act and deliver on these commitments. At the same time, it is critical to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation systems within the education sector at the country level in order to generate evidence for policy formulation, ensure accountability and support the investment case for education.

The unprecedented global education crisis galvanized multilateral and multi-stakeholder cooperation for education as the key response to the COVID-19 crisis, including through the Global Education Coalition, leading to the rethinking of the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism. Governments, teachers, families, communities and civil society organizations responded to the challenges with creativity and determination to ensure that #LearningNeverStops. We shall continue enhancing our cooperation and action to realize the right of every child, youth and adult to quality education and to advance on sustainable development.

¹ *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656>

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⁴ UNESCO. 2019. *Meeting commitments: are countries on track to achieve SDG?* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000369009>.

⁵ UNESCO. 2022. *Education: From disruption to recovery*. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

⁶ UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank and OECD. 2021. *What's Next? Lessons on Education Recovery : Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education amid the COVID-19 Pandemic*. UNESCO, Paris, UNICEF, New York, World Bank, Washington, DC, and OECD, Paris.

⁷ Sandefur, J. 2022. *Uganda's record-breaking two-year school closure led to ... no decline in number of kids who can read?* Center for Global Development: Washington, DC. <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/ugandas-record-breaking-two-year-school-closure-led-to-no-decline-number-kids-who-can-read> (accessed on February 2022)

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⁹ UNESCO. 2021. *Global Education Monitoring Report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses?* Paris, UNESCO.

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¹² UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank and OECD, *op. cit.*

¹³ UNICEF and ITU, *How many children and young people have internet access at home? Estimating digital connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic*. UNICEF, New York, 2020.

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- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² UNESCO. (2021). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses?* Paris, UNESCO.
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