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COVID-19 EDUCATION RESPONSE: FINDINGS FROM PLAN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY IN WEST & CENTRAL AFRICA

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Background on the impact of COVID-19 on education

In March 2020, the world experienced an educational disruption of unprecedented proportions. Over 190 countries declared school closures as part of the overall measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. At their peak, **school closures** disrupted the learning of over 1.5 billion students[1], representing over 91% of the world's student population.

An estimated 297 million of students in sub-Saharan Africa[2] have been affected by the school closures[3], of which **128 million children** in West and Central Africa. The region ranks fifth[4] in terms of days of full school closure

The COVID-19 crisis hit this region in which education systems were already threatened by serious challenges, including:

- Gender inequality: Gender inequality in education in West and Central Africa remains the highest in the world. 28 million girls (of primary and secondary school age) have no access to education, due to unequal gender norms, school-related gender-based violence, early pregnancy, child marriage, and poverty.[5]
- Violence: Before the outbreak, the Sahel countries had already witnessed the closure of 3,300 schools due to targeting by armed groups.[6]
- Lack of quality: In Niger, for instance, only one in ten children meets expected levels of reading and mathematics at the end of primary school.[7]

The countries in this region are further characterised by high levels of poverty and young (i.e. school aged) populations. Nearly half the populations of Benin, Mali and Niger, for example, are under 15 years.

Previous crises have shown that the negative impacts of such crises are exacerbated for education systems that were already under stress and for children who were at risk of **dropping out** before the crisis.[8] The Malala Fund, for instance, estimates that around 20 million girls may not return to school when they reopen (11 million according to UNESCO estimates) due to factors such as early marriage, pregnancies, and increased poverty, amongst others.[9] Thus, COVID-19 risks causing a setback in achieving SDG 4, and further widening inequalities in access to inclusive education.

The pandemic has caused serious disruptions to the normal operation of the school year (see annex I and II), as a result of the abrupt closures of schools and lost learning time. The disruption of education was exacerbated by the time taken to successfully obtain the necessary resources to start **distance learning programmes**. In some countries, distance learning was substantively rolled out close to school reopening.

The start-up time and duration of distance education services vary from country to country, based on the extent of contagion in the countries and their technical and technological capacities to ensure the provision of education through various traditional and/or modern channels. The technological means included teaching by radio, television, internet, USB sticks, and readers. Outreach constituted a great challenge in most countries due to the existing digital divide between boys and girls, urban and rural areas, and rich and poor people. This divide was further exacerbated by the suspension of many households' economic activities, as a result of restrictive measures on the movement of the population. Besides access, the quality of distance education relied on the teachers' abilities to provide adapted learning materials and to use their pedagogical expertise to help their students.

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1   UNESCO (2021), *Education: from disruption to recovery - COVID-19 impact on education.*
2   UN (2020) Radio lessons: In Africa schools are closed, but learning goes on. https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/may-2020/coronavirus/africa-schools-are-closed-learning-goes
3   UNICEF (2020), Humanitarian Action for Children 2021 - West and Central Africa. https://reliefweb.int/report/benin/humanitarian-action-children-2021-west-and-central-africa
4   UNICEF, Covid-19 and School Closures, One year of Education Disruption, https://data.unicef.org/resources/one-year-of-covid-19-and-school-closures
5   Regional Coordination Group on SDG4 in West and Central Africa, Gender Equality and Inclusive Education Task Team (2017). *Promoting Girls Right to Learn in Western and Central Africa.*
6   UNICEF (2020). *Crisis in the Central Sahel: Advocacy: Advocacy Brief.*
7   UNESCO. *Databank.* http://data.uis.unesco.org/
8   Plan International (2015). *Ebola: Beyond the health emergency.*
9   UNESCO, UNGEI, Plan International, Malala Fund (2020). *Building Back Equal: Girls Back to School Guide.*

DISTANCE LEARNING SOLUTIONS[10]

While a majority of the countries around the world worked to implement solutions to ensure children continued learning even with schools closed, their capacity to deliver, especially to the most vulnerable children, varied enormously. A survey[11] undertaken by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank indicates that, overall, internet was the most used modality, as 90% of countries provided at least one measure to increase access to devices, connectivity and online learning. This was followed by paper-based take-home materials (85%) and radio-based learning (61%), with television at 7%.

However, there were significant differences. Low-income countries relied more on radio and television (92-93%), while high income countries relied more on online platforms (95%). Student access to these materials was also an issue.[12] Research shows that many adolescents do not have access to the necessary materials or infrastructure to keep up with their education.[13] While globally, 53% of households are connected to the internet, the number of students without any access to internet connection varies from less than 15% in Western Europe and North America to 80% in Sub-Saharan Africa. Inequalities are also found at the national level, between rural and urban areas and between different demographic groups. Even for those who do have access, a problem still lies in the digital literacy of both students and teachers, as well as the digital literacy of caregivers who may be responsible for facilitating children's at-home learning.[14]

The **pandemic impacted the learning of girls and boys differently**. A wealth of research has shown that the impact of COVID-19 led to girls being more likely to fall behind in their studies or drop out of school, and/or be exposed to higher risks of abuse and exploitation.

Girls' involvement in **domestic work** often means they find it more difficult to follow distance education programmes, creating a risk of falling behind. In one study, 63% of girls reported an increased household burden during the COVID-19 crisis, compared to 43% for boys.[15] Caring responsibilities and housework traditionally fall to girls in the WACA region, leading to absenteeism or dropout.[16]

The digitalisation of education has also put a strain on girls' education, due to the **'Digital Gender Divide'**, which means that boys and girls have unequal access to technology needed to access digital learning. In many countries, the use of computers and internet is more frequent among boys than girls.[17] Worldwide, the proportion of women using the internet is 12% lower than the proportion of men using the internet. While the gap has narrowed in most regions, it has widened in Africa, where the proportion of women using the internet is 25% lower than the proportion of men using the internet.[18]

There are indications that the lack of access to schooling resulted in negative effects such as unwanted pregnancies with very limited access to reproductive health services, child or forced marriage resulting from household poverty, intra-family violence, and the non-continuation of learning due to very high workloads.

Due to the pandemic, the factors leading to child marriage have also been amplified: lack of education, economic hardship, parental death, and teenage pregnancies. As a result, according to UNICEF, an additional 10 million girls worldwide will be at risk of child marriage this decade.[19]

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10 See also below point IV on governments' responses.
11 UNESCO, UNICEF & the World Bank (October 2020). *What have we learnt? Overview of findings from a survey of ministries of education on national responses to COVID-19.*
12 INEE & The Alliance for Child protection in humanitarian action (2021). *What school closures under COVID-19 mean for children and young people in crisis-affected contexts.*
13 ODI (2020). *COVID-19 risk pathways for adolescents girls in low and middle-income countries.*
14 INEE & The Alliance for Child protection in humanitarian action (2021)
15 Ibidem.
16 Care International (2020). *Ebola Gender Analysis*
17 Plan International (2021). *Bridging the gender digital divide.*
18 OECD (2018). *More needs to be done to bridge the digital gender divide.*
19 The prevalence for the WACA region is 41%, or 4 out of 10 girls and young women were married before the age of 18 (nearly 60 million). Source: UNICEF (2020). *Child marriage.*

Background, scope and limitations of the survey

Plan International conducted the current survey in West and Central Africa in the last quarter of 2020, as one of several research efforts to understand the impact of COVID-19 on education.

Questionnaires were distributed to Plan country offices in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria to gather information on challenges set by school closures to education as well as governments' and Plan International's responses to support learning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaires also aimed to identify concrete measures aimed at supporting teachers and vulnerable children, especially girls, children with disabilities and those forcibly displaced.

The results of the surveys provide an overview of the situation in these countries at this specific period of time as perceived by front line practitioners, based on official data but also on first - anecdotal - evidence gathered though contact with local communities or in the framework of project implementation. They form the basis for recommendations to inform practice and policy, which can help education systems recover from the current crisis and build back better for the future[20].

20 Comments can be sent to Cassiopee.Mairiaux@plantinternational.be

I. GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

If there has been a silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be that it stimulated the creation of **multiple pathways to delivering distance education**. Countries featured in this research have planned and/or implemented multi-modal delivery of distance education programmes as a key feature of their education COVID-19 response. The countries have also realized the urgency to invest in distance education programmes and in ICT infrastructure to crisis-proof education delivery in the years ahead.

The **resumption of school** has been observed in all countries with the relaxation of restrictive measures. All schools have reopened except in countries in which some were already closed following threats of attacks from non-state armed groups. Guidelines have been drawn up asking school administrations to observe social distancing, compulsory mask wearing, hand washing, and the establishment and/or activation of an early warning mechanism. In order to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the validation of the year and academic results of students, governments, through their ministries in charge of education, have had to be flexible.

Countries have undertaken actions to ensure teachers and students are safe and protected, and that teachers are able to support students who are learning from home. Benin has organized a campaign to screen teachers, provide them personal protective equipment, and training in distance education techniques. In Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Ministries of Educations have distributed masks to teachers and students. The school curriculum in Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Benin includes model lessons on methods of preventing coronavirus disease.

Teachers and students were required to wear masks, wash their hands and observe other hygiene practices to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. In Benin, the government distributed 20,440 handwashing devices to 793,600 learners and 19,800 teachers. In CAR, UNICEF, other UN agencies, and NGOs have supported the Government in providing handwashing facilities throughout the country, including in towns and villages.

In Cameroon, the Government has distributed handwashing facilities (tap buckets, soap, bleach) to schools.

At the time of data collection, schools were closed in Mali and Nigeria for fear of accelerating the spread of COVID-19 and a potential second wave. For Mali, the school holiday periods were extended to 23 January 2021, meaning that four months of schooling were lost, in contrast to the years before the COVID-19 pandemic. In CAR, schools in the capital Bangui were open while many others in the provinces remained closed. Among the few that were functional, thanks to the support of NGOs, there were 41 schools and 63 catch-up centres supported by Plan International.

In all countries, **the 2020 school year has been validated** so that students can move into the next grade in the new academic year. However, the annual school calendar had to be adjusted in certain cases according to the evolution of the pandemic. The reopening has been gradual in many cases to promote social distancing. For instance, in Mali and Burkina Faso, schools reopened after three months, although only for exam classes followed by intermediate and primary level classes. Catch-up courses were organized for the pupils in CAR and Niger. Below are country-specific outlines of government responses.

In Burkina Faso, the government decided to use alternatives that are favourable to pupils in order to avoid repeating a year as far as possible. This involved allowing pupils in intermediate classes to be assessed on the basis of their cumulative marks for the two terms (1 and 2) that have already been taught. According to the information collected, this government measure mitigated the negative impact of the pandemic on school results.

School closures - Responses by Country

The government of **Benin** imposed school closures on March 22, 2020 to curb the spread of COVID-19. As a result, 3.5 million students from pre-primary to tertiary education were out of school. To support continued learning during school closures, the Ministry of Education broadcast lessons aligned with curriculum via national radio, community radio, television and online through social networks. The Ministry also set up a platform for online courses for students enrolled in higher education. Of these modalities, radio education was believed to have reached more students as radio coverage in Benin is 59.2%, higher than the 56.9% average in sub-Saharan Africa. The government raised awareness and disseminated information to inform parents and students of the availability of distance education programmes as well as to prepare the students for the resumption of classes.

Nationwide school closures in **Burkina Faso** commenced on March 16, 2020 leaving nearly 4.7 million pre-primary to tertiary students out of school. To support education continuity, the government established a distance education programme broadcast through radio and television, made possible by partnership with various partners and radio and television networks. The distance education programme focused on courses for students of examination classes. Awareness raising measures were also implemented to disseminate COVID-19 risk and prevention messages as well as information on distance education programmes. Overall, the distance education programmes were effective in reaching students in urban areas, but not those in rural areas who have no access to radio and television sets, solar batteries, or electricity.

As with many other countries, **Cameroon** closed all schools at all levels on March 18, 2020, affecting an estimated 7.2 million learners. To support continued learning, the government organized distance education through television and radio channels and produced and distributed printed lessons and old tests for students. These measures specifically targeted those in examination classes which enabled the conduct of end-of-year exams. The government also raised awareness on COVID-19 risks and prevention through seminars and listening clubs formed by students.

The **CAR** government declared nationwide school closures on March 27, 2020. This impacted the learning of over 976,000 students from 3,679 schools and institutions from pre-primary to tertiary levels. To support educational continuity, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with UNICEF, implemented distance education through radio broadcasts of educational content. The coverage of these radio programmes was very limited as a majority of households in many towns and villages are unable to afford a radio set.

All schools in **Guinea** closed on March 24, 2020 affecting an estimated three million pre-primary to tertiary students from 14,533 schools and educational institutions. To support education continuity, the government introduced online courses and broadcasting of lessons through various media (national radio, rural radio, and private media) for examination classes (last grades of primary and lower secondary; 2nd/3rd years of upper secondary). These distance learning modalities enabled the examination students to complete their programmes and prepare for their examinations. The government also distributed teaching modules to students who were learning at home. In addition to the students of the examination classes, those of the intermediate classes returned to school in June/September to complete the year.

Mali closed all schools on March 19, 2020, initially for a period of three weeks, before being extended until June when it partially reopened for examination classes. An estimated 3.8 million students from pre-primary to secondary education were affected. Learning centres and temporary learning spaces in crisis-affected areas were also closed affecting over half a million displaced children. With school closures came the suspension of school feeding programmes, negatively affecting the health of students. To support the continuity of learning, the government launched online and television education programmes and distributed paper-based take home packages. The reach and scope of these measures has not been determined. The government also planned a radio education programme, which started very slowly and did not have the desired uptake as a national distance education programme.

In **Niger**, nationwide, school closures that commenced on March 20, 2020 affected an estimated 3.7 million students and more than 80,000 teachers from pre-primary to tertiary levels. The school closures were particularly challenging for vulnerable children who were accessing school feeding programmes and child protection services through schools, especially those who live in rural and/or conflict-affected areas.

To support education continuity, the Ministry of Education planned a response that included the development and distribution of exercise workbooks (with key subjects such as Math and French) for learners, especially those who would sit for exams, and distance education courses through radio, television, and WhatsApp and other online platforms. While the exercise books reached many children, radio, television broadcasts and online platforms were either not implemented or were less accessible due to low access to technology, poor ICT infrastructure or low internet bandwidth.

As with many other countries, the Federal Ministry of Education in **Nigeria** imposed nationwide school closures on March 19, 2020. The school closures led to significant disruptions in the education system in Nigeria affecting 39.4 million pre-primary to tertiary students, the highest number in any single country in Africa. Many students lost not only access to learning but access to other services provided through schools, including school feeding and child protection. To stem learning loss, the federal and state governments, education partners and private sector implemented various learning interventions using technological platforms, internet-based tools, and traditional media (radio and television). The government set up a task team to develop and roll out radio learning programmes. About 2,000 reading clubs were established with support from education partners such as Plan International, Save the Children and UNICEF. Radio and television stations aired lessons during the period of school closure, i.e. in Borno state, all radio stations were used for both Junior Secondary School (JSS) and primary schools, while television stations only targeted JSS. Printed learning materials were distributed to students, while handwashing stands and hygiene materials were provided to communities and reading club centres. Monitoring of reading clubs to ensure COVID-19 preventive measures by the State Universal Basic Education Board and respective partners were conducted to ensure that physical distancing and other health protocols were being enforced. Some states reported supporting internet-based learning platforms for students, but reach was low. Radio learning programmes were deemed the most effective in reaching more students but challenges existed with regard to issues of some community members not listening to radio and not adhering to the timing of the broadcasts.

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II. CHALLENGES

While governments have worked to implement responses to the pandemic and limit disruption to education, the survey has shown some areas that display gaps in implementation and uptake of the policy responses. The survey also identified specific challenges related to return to education when school reopened.

Challenges related to school closures

LACK OF MONITORING OF IMPLEMENTATION AND UPTAKE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

While the countries delivered diverse forms of distance education programmes appropriate for their contexts, through a combination of radio, television, online platforms, printed self-learning materials, worksheets and activity books, there was no systematic measurement and tracking of the coverage of these education programmes nor or of student learning while accessing these programmes.

In terms of technology, radio was the most widely planned or used, followed by television. Benin, Guinea, Niger, and Nigeria supported online learning through various online platforms, including social media. The uptake for online learning was perceived to be low and limited to urban centres or tertiary levels. Distribution of self-learning materials/worksheets took place in Cameroon, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Nigeria as a solution that had the potential to reach more children, given technology limitations, especially for those who live in rural, geographically challenging, or crisis-affected areas. Monitoring of the distribution and use of paper-based solution was, however, not reported in these countries. A related issue is the difficulty of monitoring children's learning at home. This is due, on the one hand, to the lack of a mechanism in place to allow teachers to interact with students, and on the other hand, parents who may not have the time or abilities to follow up.

LIMITED MEASURES TO SUPPORT LEARNING OF GIRLS, CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND DISPLACED CHILDREN

Across eight countries, there were very few measures undertaken by governments to ensure that girls, children with disabilities and displaced children were accessing distance education programmes.

Activities that took place included: (1) Nigeria encouraged adolescent girls to enrol by providing them with dignity kits (comprising of menstrual hygiene and personal care items) and educational materials and distributed worksheets (from radio programmes) to displaced children in camps; (2) Guinea, Mali and Niger disseminated messages encouraging parents to enrol girls, children with disabilities and displaced children, but there was no concrete measure to help them access distance learning programmes; (3) Mali adapted the special education programmes in specialized schools, schools for children living with disability, but these establishments cater to very few children; and (4) some educational programmes broadcast on national television have been adapted to the needs of children with hearing impairment in Cameroon. Overall, however, measures to support vulnerable children were limited and sporadic.

LACK OF SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING

For young people, long-term confinement and isolation from educational spaces perpetuate the decrease of their support networks. These prolonged closures and isolation from peers and classmates during lockdown measures could trigger stress and anxiety.

It is for this reason that education interventions during crises should prioritize mental health and psychosocial well-being of students. Lessons from the 2014-16 Ebola outbreak showed that informal learning programmes that provided psychosocial support resulted in remarkable impact on education outcomes.

The survey found few interventions in this area. Nigeria trained teachers on how to integrate psychosocial support in radio learning programmes. Cameroon trained teachers on providing psychosocial support to students as well as COVID-19 awareness and prevention. Niger has developed a national teacher training module on psychosocial support with teachers and children in crisis-affected areas as target group, but the roll out of training was sparse.

LIMITED SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

The focus of education responses in many countries was on delivering content to students unable to physically attend school, using paper-based, radio, television, and online approaches. In the eight countries surveyed, there was limited support to teachers themselves. The support provided mostly focused on training a few teachers and continued payment of salaries for most teachers during the duration of school closures.

Benin trained some teachers in the methods of distance education to enable them to deliver lessons broadcast via radio and television. Niger trained teachers on COVID-19 risk and prevention and provided them with hygiene supplies. But this support did not reach all teachers, especially those in rural areas. The CAR continued to pay teachers' salaries but did not train teachers until the schools reopened. Guinea and Cameroon continued to pay teachers' salaries. Cameroon also involved some teachers in the preparation of radio and television lessons and trained them on COVID-19 risks and prevention. Overall, there were no major efforts to engage or train teachers in developing or rolling out distance education programmes. Finally, there were no major efforts to assess and support teachers' well-being, and therefore to help them better support the wellbeing of learners.

Main Barriers to return to schools

This survey corroborates many assumptions put forward by education specialists since mid-2020 regarding potential risks and barriers to the reintegration of children and girls in schools after the COVID-19 related closures.

Although this survey cannot provide broadscale estimation of the number of children affected, anecdotal evidence suggests significant levels of dropouts when school reopened. For instance, in a target region of Benin, more than 10% of the sampled children did not return to school when they first reopened (this figure was lowered thanks to additional action from Plan).[21]

As mentioned above, specific challenges faced by girls globally have also been observed in the surveyed countries, such as the rise of early and forced child marriage, teenage pregnancies or economic exploitation of girls, which have negatively impacted their ability to come back to education when schools reopened.

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21 2,640 cases of abandonment, including 1,255 girls out of 2,240 children (i.e. approximately 13%). The project's actions have led to the return of 917 pupils (433 girls and 484 boys).

A CONTEXT OF INSECURITY

The COVID-19 health emergency struck in already fragile countries of the region and challenged existing peace-keeping processes. Respondents to the survey reported that threats and attacks on communities have increased and state-run schools are regularly targeted. Fear of school attacks or insecurity on the way to schools have also prevented children, in particular girls, from attending classes. Stakeholders reported that students' increased exposure to violence and sexual harassment or abuse constitute serious obstacles to girls when returning to school.

FEAR OF COVID-19

Stakeholders reported that fear of contracting the disease is one of the key factors in students dropping out despite communication efforts and specific hygiene practices put in place. In Cameroon and Niger, for example, community members shared that their fear of the pandemic was one of the reasons that prevented them from sending their children back to school.

ECONOMIC CRISIS & POVERTY

The pandemic has caused many upheavals in the daily lives of the population. With the announcement of a state of emergency, there has been disruption to the socio-economic conditions of many. Populations have been severely affected by the simultaneous increase in expenditures (for example, due to rise in food prices) and loss of jobs and income.

This has impacted families' abilities to pay school-related fees (e.g., uniforms, books) and therefore negatively impacted the attendance of children when schools reopened. For example, in Guinea, the pandemic has negatively impacted the household economy. When schools reopened, many parents responsible for supporting several children found it extremely difficult to pay school fees, particularly school supplies and outfits. Food prices and school fees (supplies, school kits, etc.) have increased without accompanying measures.

EARLY INTEGRATION IN INCOME GENERATION ACTIVITIES & EXPLOITATION

The increased poverty of families has pushed many children to drop out of school and take up work in order to meet their needs and those of their families. Children, especially teenagers, have been forced to abandon school in order to carry out economic activities for the survival of the family. In these situations, girls are the most exposed to risks of economic or sexual exploitation.

A rapid needs assessment carried out by Plan International Nigeria between November and December 2020 revealed that children, especially girls, were kept from returning to school by parents in order to support agricultural activities.

Education stakeholders in the CAR stated that during the period of school closures, many parents took their children to the gold mines, often in places that are insecure or difficult to access, making it even more challenging to reach this population.

LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURES & PEDAGOGICAL SUPPORT

In the CAR, while the school year officially started in September 2020, schools were only operating in Bangui or in the areas where they are supported by NGOs and the UN. The schools often lack teachers or have teachers who refuse to work due to poor salaries and working conditions.

In Cameroon, respondents pointed to slowness in the reallocation of funding for alternative education and support for the education of young girls in the return to school.

In Nigeria respondents reported the lack of adapted classrooms, learning facilities, and adequate teachers.

III. RESPONSES BY PLAN INTERNATIONAL

This section consolidates information on Plan International's COVID-19 education response in the eight countries, firstly, by detailing the response in each country and secondly, by detailing how Plan International has worked to address the gaps in response identified above.

Country-Specific Responses

In **Benin**, Plan International provided financial support to the Ministry of Education in the development of radio and television education programmes. It provided handwashing stations, hygiene materials, posters and signages on COVID-19 risk and prevention to 1,564 primary schools and 391 colleges, benefitting at least 160,342 individuals including 69,222 girls, and 77 girls and 123 boys with disabilities. It also trained 845 (121 women) teachers, facilitators, volunteers and peer educators on COVID-19 prevention and protection against sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse. It raised awareness on COVID-19 risks and prevention through daily radio broadcasts in 14 local languages for three months over seven local radio stations targeting students, teachers, parents, and community members. These measures enabled schools in Plan's intervention areas to prepare for safe reopening.

In **Burkina Faso,** Plan International supported the broadcast of the distance education courses, developed by the Ministry of Education, on the airwaves of two local radio stations that cover a large part of the North Central region. These courses were broadcast over a period of three months, primarily for the benefit of the students of the exam classes (last years of primary and senior high school). Over the same period, these local radio stations also aired interactive games on school discipline. The games offered an opportunity for students to call the radio stations directly to answer the questions and to win prizes. Plan provided 140 schools in project areas with hygiene kits. School actors were trained in monitoring radio learning of students and sensitizing communities on COVID-19 risks and preventions, reaching 60,328 individuals (29,521 women) from three municipalities. Plan also organized and trained members of the Community Committees for the Protection of Children on COVID-19 risks and prevention as well as protection of children from abuse and exploitation. COVID-19 prevention messages from well-respected community leaders were regularly broadcast in two local radio stations in three local languages (Moore, Fulfulde and French) over a period of four months with an estimated 600,000 people reached in the North Central region.

In **Cameroon**, Plan aligned with Ministry priorities and provided educational support to students in certificate exam classes during school closures. It also identified primary school teachers in each village for individual support to students applying for certificate exams. It provided copies of previous exams to students from schools in project site schools to help them prepare for examinations. Likewise, Plan provided water buckets, soap, and face masks to help schools implement hygiene protocols and prevent COVID-19 transmission. Plan also mobilized school leaders, community volunteers and members of parent-student associations on a coordinated COVID-19 response as well as outreach to rural areas on parental responsibility, risks of COVID-19 infection, risks of abuse and domestic hazards.

In Minawao camp, Cameroon, Plan supported distance education through broadcasting of courses on local radio stations, distribution of radio sets, USB sticks and course materials to exam class students. It supported facilitators, parents and teachers to assist children at home. Plan organized home-based educational activities for children aged 3-5 under parental supervision. It trained community facilitators, parent teacher associations to support children in accessing distance learning during COVID-19 crisis. In particular, 13 awareness raising campaigns on COVID-19 and school return were implemented in nine communities (Amchide, Kerawa, Tayer and Bounderi, Mara, Molodia, Bodo, Medina, Makary) of the Far-North region. With 270 trainers, the campaigns reached 6834 people, including 2560 girls aged 10-24.

During the period of COVID-19 crisis and school closures, Plan International in the **Central African Republic** supported education continuity by providing all students in project sites with exercise and homework sheets benefitting a total of 23,356 students (11,845 girls). During the same period, door-to-door sensitizations visits were conducted by parent-teachers[22] in preparation for the return to school, emphasizing the importance of girls' education and education of other vulnerable groups.

In **Guinea**, Plan International has provided technical and financial support to the Ministry of Education's distance education programmes delivered through online, radio and private media platforms for students in the candidate classes. In addition, Plan has equipped all student candidates from the schools covered by its projects with school kits and materials to help them prepare for the entrance exam in Grade 7. Plan provided all schools in project sites with hand-washing kits and hygiene materials. The target groups were, in general, students, members of co-management structures including parent-teachers associations and community management structures, religious leaders and general populations. Moreover, Plan has identified and trained community volunteers, along with local health authorities, to prevent COVID-19 spread.

In **Mali**, Plan provided financial support to the Ministry of Education in the development of distance learning programmes using radio, television and online platforms. It also adapted its programming to support education continuity in its programme areas through catch-up and remedial education classes, radio broadcast of education content in community radio stations, distribution of radios and USB keys with pre-recorded education programmes to those not reached by radio networks. Finally, Plan provided learning packets and worksheets to learners of Speed Schools, an accelerated education programme. The organization provided a number of schools with school desks.

In **Niger** Plan International's response was focused on awareness raising on COVID-19 risk and prevention through local and community radios. In addition, awareness and information campaigns were led by young leaders, community volunteers, children, and youth clubs. Plan distributed handwashing stands, soaps and sanitizers, and demonstrated appropriate hygiene practices. It also provided exercise workbooks for students who were sitting for exams and learning packages and worksheets for Speed School learners who are among the most vulnerable children.

Plan **Nigeria**, for its part, collaborated with different donors and government to carry out distance education through radio programmes to support education continuity for children in project sites.

On the following pages, the specific responses implemented by Plan International to address some of the challenges.

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22 Parent-teachers fill critical gaps in remote, insecure areas. They have been identified by local communities to provide basic education in conflict-affected areas in CAR. See: UNICEF (2012). *In the Central African Republic, parent-teachers provide basic education in conflict-affected area and beyond.*

Plan International's Support for Girls, Children living with Disabilities and Displaced Children

In **Benin**, Plan International organized discussions with girls' associations to inform them about the availability of online courses, schedule of courses and COVID-19 risks and prevention. Likewise, it trained groups of young women and children with disabilities on producing soap that they could sell to be able to acquire radio sets to access radio education. Plan also trained young women on making reusable masks and on prevention of early pregnancy, child marriage, abuse, and exploitation.

Plan provided protective and hygiene kits and food to children in Gaoua Visually Disabled Centre in **Burkina Faso** and broadcasted a radio programme to educate households about positive and gender-sensitive parenting practices that promote better treatment of girls and boys at home, especially during COVID-19 lockdowns. This programme was broadcast via three local radio stations (covering the entire North Central region, which is the leading region for hosting internally displaced persons) in three languages over a one-month period.

In **Cameroon**, girls who passed the examinations in the science thread were provided school kits to enable them to continue their studies, despite the disruption due to COVID-19. Awareness campaigns on the importance of girls' education were carried out through focus group discussions with young girls and Mothers' associations; radio programmes were produced with the participation of young girls, heads of women's promotion centres and social workers to increase awareness on importance of girls' education and availability of distance learning programmes.

Plan supported community sensitizations in **CAR** and **Guinea** during the crisis and in preparation for school reopening with strong messaging on children's rights and the importance of the education of girls and other vulnerable groups.

In Guinea, Plan International renovated latrines to support the campaign for a safe return of girls to school after the pandemic. Three schools in Kouentoh, Bakama Lela and Yomadou Koudou Fama benefited from this intervention. In these three areas, the general return rate was 87%, 84% for girls. The direct beneficiaries reached were 709 children, including 323 girls.

Plan in **Mali** ensured that half of all distance learning programme participants were girls. It supported girls with dignity kits and put in place surveillance mechanisms to prevent sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse of children, especially girls. Displaced children continued to receive education and protection services in temporary learning spaces. Children living with disabilities were supported with continued access to learning through radio education.

Awareness raising and back to school campaigns by Plan **Niger** targeted girls and children living with disabilities in recognition of their increased vulnerability due to COVID-19 crisis. Children living with disabilities also benefitted from special kits to support their learning and help them practice good hygiene at home.

In **Nigeria**, Plan International provided menstrual hygiene management kits ("dignity kits") to 136 school girls aged 13-17 years, to support their participation in educational activities in their menstrual periods and reduce school drop-outs.

Plan International's Support to Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being

In **Benin**, Plan organized and trained mentors and young leaders in the communities to record and relay complaints of abuse of girls. It also raised awareness on reporting of abuse through radio broadcasts. It created WhatsApp groups to facilitate safe exchanges and information sharing, and trained girls on cyber harassment and online community.

Plan in **Burkina Faso** trained women from foster families on stress management and care for children in distress during COVID-19. It also trained poor orphaned children living in reception centres on protective and hygiene practices to prevent COVID-19 infection.

Psychosocial support is an essential aspect of Plan's support for children affected by conflict in **CAR**. It supported teachers to monitor children's situations and provide psychosocial support as needed.

In **Mali**, Plan provided support to the National Directorate of Preschool education for the editing and publication of illustrated storybooks for preschool children and provided toys for preschool children to play with.

In **Niger**, Plan trained teachers in project sites in providing psychosocial support to their students, especially girls.

Plan International's Support to Teachers

Plan's support for teachers focused on awareness raising and training on COVID-19 risks and prevention; prevention of sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse; and roles in supporting children's distance learning. In **Benin**, Plan raised awareness on the role of teachers in COVID-19 prevention through radio broadcasts in collaboration with education and health authorities. In **Burkina Faso**, **CAR** and **Niger**, Plan trained teachers on COVID-19 risks and prevention while in **Guinea**, Plan strengthened teachers' capacities for the reopening of intermediate classes, and provided training on active pedagogical techniques as well as COVID-19 prevention.

In **Cameroon**, Plan trained teachers in project sites on COVID-19 risks and prevention and to supervise students in following health and safety protocols. Plan also identified teachers in a select number of schools to provide pedagogical support to students in candidate classes. Plan also continued payment of incentives to animators and teachers that facilitate the education projects it supports. In the Far-North region of Cameroon, Plan International supported the training of 45 teachers including 10 women in PSS aiming at reinforcing the resilience of school children, refugee children, and children living in hard-to-reach areas prone to attacks.

In **Nigeria**, teachers were engaged in the production of teaching and learning materials. By end of the lock down period, sufficient learning materials (i.e. flash cards of numbers and letters) were produced to serve more than 20,000 learners – well beyond the number of learners targeted in the remote learning intervention.

Overall, Plan International supported the development and implementation of national distance learning programmes in these countries, along with specific measures to support girls, children with disabilities, displaced children, and teachers.

Plan International's Support to Governments to Validate the School Year

Plan International has provided substantial support to the Ministries of Education in various countries to ensure the safe reopening of schools and the validation of the school year. In CAR, for example, Plan International distributed school kits to students. In **Benin**, Plan International distributed 9,585 hand washing devices and 11,844 awareness posters to 1,564 primary schools and 391 secondary schools in 9 departments of the country.

In **Burkina Faso**, Plan International, through the EQuiP project, provided 140 schools in the project area with handwashing devices. The organisation also supported awareness-raising activities about the disease in the 140 communities. Headmasters of the 140 schools in the EQuIP project area were trained in distance learning (radio lessons). During the first quarter (October-November 2020) of the 2020/2021 school year, the project supported the broadcasting of 24 radio lessons at primary level on the radio.

The Plan International **CAR** office provided handwashing facilities to schools and communities to make hand hygiene an everyday behaviour.

Plan International **Guinea** through the Gloves projects (EQuIP, PEB, SCAFEJ, TB&HIV, Palu) and Sponsorship funds provided technical and financial support to the decentralised services of the Ministry of Education to reopen schools. Covered schools and households living around schools benefited from hand washing kits, soaps, bibs for primary level children, termoflashes.

In **Mali**, Plan International's country office supported communities with wash kits and masks.

In **CAR** and **Cameroon**, Plan International initiated awareness campaigns for parents inviting them to ensure that pupils return to school when it reopens. In **Cameroon**, Plan International trained 45 adult teachers and protection staff, including 10 women, in the Far North region on psychosocial support to mitigate the impact of the crisis on the emotional capacities of pupils. In **Mali**, Plan International donated school desks to help the Ministry of Education with social distancing in classrooms.

With the exception of the Plan offices in Benin and Guinea, the other country offices contributed to the development of support measures for teachers. In **Burkina Faso**, **Cameroon**, **Mali**, **Niger** and **CAR**, training sessions were organised for teachers.

In **CAR**, Plan International initiated psychosocial support programmes for affected students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of Plan's survey validate what has been widely observed during the COVID-19 school closures: education stakeholders focused their efforts in addressing education continuity through the mobilization of a range of distance education solutions using no, low or high technology. While governments and partners aimed for wide coverage, operational challenges, lack of resources and delays in implementation limited the reach of distance education solutions. While the importance of mental health and psychosocial support to students and teachers have been widely recognised, COVID-19 responses often lacked this critical support. Support to teachers had been limited and sporadic. In light of these findings, the following recommendations are put forward:

- **Priority must be given to the reintegration of every child and adolescent, particularly girls, into the school system.** Targeted, context-specific measures to address the specific barriers to education of girls and other vulnerable children, who are now even more vulnerable as a result of COVID-19, are required. This requires, among others, large-scale awareness-raising campaigns specifically targeting parents and communities; advocating for and supporting accelerated education and/or catch-up programmes, including to support girls who have been forced to marry or who have become pregnant or mothers during the pandemic; psychosocial support; and early childhood care services to those who have young children. There is also an urgent need to monitor student enrolment and dropout, especially that of girls, children living with disabilities (D) and displaced children to identify those that are not returning or staying in school, and develop programs that address their specific needs.

- Ministries of Education and education partners should continue to support the **development and refinement of context-relevant distance education solutions that consider the diverse needs of learners**, to better prepare education systems for future pandemics. Furthermore, it is important to consider the **equitable deployment** of these solutions to ensure vulnerable children are reached. Return to in-school learning should not be a reason to stop or delay the development of these solutions. While greater interest and attention has been given to expanding digital learning solutions, governments and partners must equally invest in other distance education solutions to ensure that no child is left behind. Relevant and targeted levels of support should be provided to students, teachers, and leaders so that distance education solutions are used to their fullest potential.

- Prioritize **teachers and learners' physical and mental health and psychosocial well-being**. Stress and anxiety have characterized the lives of teachers and students during COVID-19. Teachers and students alike need socio-emotional support to face challenges of learning and teaching during and post-crisis. Education responses should, therefore, have concrete, targeted and context-specific support to address this need, integrated into teacher training and support, and learner-centered teaching approaches.

- Provide **adequate training for teachers, particularly to respond to specific challenges arising from COVID-19 crisis**. Teachers are the backbone of education systems and have the strongest influence on student learning. They should be fully equipped with the knowledge and skills to help their students navigate the world of distance education and blended learning. This includes training in digital media.

- Advocate for the **protection of governments and donors' education budgets**. Despite additional funding needs, two-thirds of low- and lower-middle-income countries have cut their public education budgets since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.[23]

- Governments should invest in the **digitalization of Education Monitoring and Information Systems** to facilitate the collection, processing, and storage of disaggregated school data for girls, children with disabilities, and displaced children.

- Continued **promotion of good hygiene practices and prevention measures** in education settings should be encouraged and promoted.

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23 UNESCO (2021), *COVID-19: Two-thirds of poorer countries are cutting their education budgets at a time when they can least afford to.*

ANNEXES

Annex I – School reopening in surveyed countries (Situation June 18, 2020)

N°	Country	School closure date	School reopening date	Classes concerned	Comments
1.	Benin	March 2020	May 11, 2020	Examination classes	The other children continued to learn from home.
2.	Burkina Faso	April 2020	June 1, 2020	Examination classes	The school year of the other students from intermediate classes has been validated in considering their grades of previous evaluations.
3.	Cameroon	April 2020	June 1, 2020	Examination classes	For intermediate classes, the school year was validated over the marks obtained in previous evaluations.
4.	CAR	March 2020	July 1, 2020	Examination classes first	
5.	Guinea	March 2020	June 29, 2020	Examination classes	
6.	Mali	March 2020	June 2, 2020	Examination classes	The intermediate classes children continued learning learn from home.
7.	Niger	March 2020	June 1, 2020	All classes except Kindergartens	Students were divided in groups which alternate to respect the physical distancing.
8.	Nigeria	March 2020	Novembre 2, 2020	The government developed guidelines for reopening schools. Part of the plan is that the Senior Secondary classes (SS3) and Junior Secondary classes (JSS) resumed first to write the Senior and junior to do their Examinations and return home to decongest the classes for other students to resume.	However, the Federal Government has not set a date for school resumption yet.

Annex II – Academic break and closures in surveyed countries compared to Belgium, Canada and Ireland[24]

Country	Academic break (in days)	Partially closed (in days)	Fully closed (in days)	Fully open (in days)	Instruction days (in days)
Benin	54	55	21	105	181
Burkina Faso	85	21	48	81	150
Cameroon	69	53	40	73	166
CAR	38	52	67	78	197
Guinea	36	0	109	90	199
Mali	74	21	62	78	161
Niger	65	0	83	87	170
Nigeria	56	30	91	58	179
Belgium	57	40	36	102	178
Canada	70	97	66	2	165
Ireland	64	0	90	81	171

24 UNICEF (2021). *Covid-19 and School Closures, One year of Education Disruption.* https://data.unicef.org/resources/one-year-of-covid-19-and-school-closures/

Annex III – Questionnaire

PART 1 – EDUCATIONAL MEASURES & COVID-19

Source: MoE memoranda, orders, policy statements; MoE officials (give name, function); Plan International project documents; Plan International staff (name, function)

- What educational measures have been implemented to support the continuation of education during the COVID-19-related school closures?
- What public health measures have been implemented to ensure the prevention of COVID-19? What is the scope of this measure and who are the target groups?
- Which measures were considered the most effective and efficient and why?

Sub theme – measures for at-risk-children
- What specific measures have been taken to support the continuation of education for girls?
- What specific measures have been taken to support the continued education of disabled children and children displaced by school closures?

Sub theme – measures for the mental health and psychosocial support
- What measures have been put in place in the area of mental health and psychosocial support for children during school closures? What is the scope of these measures? Who are the target groups?
- What measures were put in place to provide psychological and psychosocial support to girls during the school closure? What is the scope of these measures? What were the specific target groups?

Sub theme – measures to support teachers
- What measures have been put in place to support teachers during the COVID-19 school closures? What is the scope of these measures?

PART 2: MAIN MEASURES PUT IN PLACE BY THE GOVERNMENT (MOE) AND PLAN INTERNATIONAL TO SUPPORT THE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

Source: Ministry of Education documents, policy statements; Ministry of Education officials (indicate name, position); project documents; Plan International staff (name, position)

- What educational measures are being implemented to support the reopening of schools? What public health measures are being implemented to support the reopening of schools? What is the scope of these measures? Who are the target groups?

Sub theme – educational measures for at-risk-children
- What educational measures are being implemented to ensure the enrollment/return of girls to school when schools reopen? What is the scope of these measures? What are the target groups?
- What educational measures are being implemented to ensure the enrollment/return to school of children with disabilities and displaced children when schools reopen? What is the scope of these measures? Who are the target groups?

Sub theme – additional measures for at-risk-children
- What additional measures are in place to ensure the return of vulnerable girls to school?
- What additional measures are in place to ensure the return to school of children with disabilities and displaced children?

Sub theme – measures for the mental health and psychosocial support
- What measures are in place to ensure the mental health and psychosocial support of children, particularly girls, when schools reopen? What is the scope of these measures? Who is the target group?

PART 3: MAIN OBSTACLES IDENTIFIED TO THE RETURN OF CHILDREN TO SCHOOL, PARTICULARLY OBSTACLES FACED BY GIRLS, MDC, IDPS

Source: Can be obtained from situation analysis reports, humanitarian response plans, COVID-19 education response plans, expert opinion (cite name, function), discussions with teachers/parents

- What are the main barriers that prevent children, especially girls, from returning to school?
- What are the specific barriers that prevent children with disabilities and displaced children from returning to school?

PART 4: IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON (RE)ENROLLMENT, DROPOUT, AND REPETITION RATES OF CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY GIRLS, WHEN SCHOOLS REOPEN?

Source: Ministry of Education documents and statistics; Ministry of Education plan project documents and monitoring system

- Number of children enrolled immediately prior to COVID-19-related school closures, disaggregated by gender (and if available, by education level, disability)
- Number of children who (re)enrolled/returned to school when the school reopened, disaggregated by gender (and if available, by education level and disability)
- Percentage of girls and boys who returned to school (if available, disaggregated by sex, age group and disability)
- Percentage of dropout (If available: Data disaggregated by sex, age group and disability), information on the socioeconomic profile of students who dropped out of school "
- Percentage of students who had to repeat their grade when school reopened under the new school year?"
- What is the government's position on the school year (i.e. "blank year", "cancelled year", ...)?

PART 5: IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SCHOOL REOPENING AFTER THE END OF CONTAINMENT

Source: Department of Education Documents and Statistics

- Number and percentage of schools open after the end of containment; are they partially or fully open (maintaining some distance education); are there rules in place to adapt schools to the evolution of the pandemic (alert levels, corresponding to certain measures)?

PART 6: IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TEACHER ATTENDANCE AT WORK

Source: Department of Education Documents and Statistics

- Percentage of teachers that did not return to school?
- What measures have been put in place to support teachers as schools reopen? What is the scope of these measures?

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Belgique
partenaire du développement