

## Continuing learning for the most vulnerable during COVID-19: Lessons from Let Us Learn in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Liberia, Madagascar and Nepal

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### KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Engage learners with technology they have access to, monitor learning and provide follow-up support to children, families and teachers practising remote learning.**<sup>1</sup>

Let Us Learn (LUL) programmes leveraged readily available technologies such as basic feature mobile phones for rural learners in Bangladesh, expanding remote learning to the most vulnerable. Preparing teachers and caregivers for remote instruction and supporting families economically is critical to ensure continued at-home learning while schools are closed. Specific pedagogical training is urgently needed to equip teachers and families with the tools to effectively support remote learning for children with disabilities. Further, continued cash transfers in Madagascar and Bangladesh successfully supported families who lost income during the pandemic, lowering the opportunity cost of learning. Similarly, continued remuneration of LUL teachers allowed them to use their skills and trust within the community to provide critical learning and health awareness support in remote areas.

**2. Bring learners back and mitigate learning loss by scaling up accelerated and remedial learning pathways tailored to students' needs.**

Ability-based learning pathways for out-of-school children, implemented in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Madagascar and Nepal, have been an effective means to re-engage children who have dropped out and build back foundational skills in an accelerated timeframe. To help children catch up after months of school closure, LUL-supported countries are adapting and expanding remedial learning through after-school programmes building on successful non-formal education (NFE) programmes. When safety conditions allowed during school closures, teachers and facilitators provided learning in small community-based groups, where learners often received more

individual support than in a typical, large classroom setting. These programmes, such as the Learning Circles in Nepal, were also able to provide tailored support to children with disabilities.

**3. Reinforce the capacity of community members to continue critical health, child protection and nutrition services when schools and learning centres are closed.**

Schools and learning centres could no longer serve as delivery points for such essential services during the lockdowns. It is imperative that communities be equipped with the capacity to continue these services during times of crisis, from the identification and referral of victims of violence to the delivery of psychosocial support, through to the supply of nutrition services. In Liberia, when learning centres were closed, local Child Welfare Committees were trained to provide psychosocial support and continue referral mechanisms for children identified as victims of violence.

**4. Increase resilience of education by learning from non-formal education (NFE) actors on how to reach the most marginalized children.**

NFE practitioners work with the most vulnerable children, who are both left out of the formal education system and the hardest to reach with remote learning. Governments should work with and learn from NFE actors to prepare for crises with a focus on the most marginalized. In addition, as shown by the response to COVID-19, the accelerated curricula used for out-of-school children in non-formal settings can serve as a useful starting point for developing materials for remote learning and remedial instruction to mitigate learning loss during times of crisis. Government and non-government education providers should also further coordinate to ensure clear pathways for out-of-school NFE learners to enter school, receive accreditation and acquire foundational and life skills.

<sup>1</sup> Remote learning is understood as digital, including online and offline platforms, TV, radio or paper-based packages.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every aspect of society. In mid-April 2020, 192 countries had closed their schools, putting 9 out of 10 enrolled children out of school (UNESCO, 2020a). These closures disproportionately affected marginalized children, worsening existing inequities across education systems worldwide (Taulo et al., 2020).

This report draws on the experience of five UNICEF education country programmes supported by the Let Us Learn (LUL) initiative, to **document tangible lessons in adapting education programmes to support the most marginalized children during school and learning centre closures**. The evidence in this report stems from a series of semi-structured interviews with Education and Child Protection specialists, as well as a document review of available COVID-19 response studies, in the five LUL-supported UNICEF Country Offices (see Annex).

LUL supports education programmes for marginalized children in five countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Liberia, Madagascar and Nepal. While the specific

programmes that LUL supports vary based on the needs of each country, all align with at least one of four pillars: access and retention, quality education, institutional strengthening, and disaster risk reduction. LUL programmes include a vast array of interventions in both formal and non-formal settings, targeting in- and out-of-school children and adolescents from early childhood to secondary school age (see *Table 1*). Several LUL programmes support out-of-school children by bringing learning pathways to communities without access to schools. These pathways often rely on accelerated curricula to allow children who have missed out on education to catch up with their peers, develop foundational skills to continue learning, or develop vocational skills to enter the job market. Many LUL programmes leverage evidence-based practices such as teaching at the right level (TaRL) and competence-based approaches facilitating learning for students with a wide variety of learning levels and needs.



**Table 1. Overview of LUL programmes by country**

| Country     | Programme                                  | Age           | Target population <sup>2</sup> | Key design components for marginalized students   |
|-------------|--|---------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Afghanistan | Accelerated Learning Centres (ALCs)        | 10–15         | 2,800 OOSC                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community-based learning centres offering 3-year course for primary school equivalency</li> <li>Government engagement and advocacy</li> </ul>  |
|             | Girls' Access To Teacher Education (GATE)  | 12–20         | 200 teachers                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teacher training to secondary school girls in underserved areas</li> </ul>   |
| Bangladesh  | Pre-Primary Education (PPE)                | 4–6           | 9,000 OOSC                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishment of community-based PPE centres in remote villages, 1-year government curriculum + community mobilization</li> <li>Test/mainstream national standards for quality PPE</li> </ul>  |
|             | Ability Based Accelerated Learning (ABAL)  | 8–14          | 3,750 OOSC                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>44-month programme in community-based learning centres with flexible hours and ability-based teaching</li> </ul>   |
|             | Alternative Learning Pathway (ALP)         | 14–18         | 1,000 OOSC                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6-month workplace training with a local business owner + classroom training to reinforce foundational and life skills</li> </ul>   |
| Nepal       | Early Childhood Development (ECD)          | <5            | 2,500 students                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Training of ECD facilitators and provision of materials</li> <li>Capacity-building of local government officials on monitoring of ECD quality standards</li> </ul>   |
|             | Early Grade Learning (EGL)                 | 5–9           | 16,000 at-risk students        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provision of mother-tongue instructional materials for non-Nepali speakers and community-based education groups</li> <li>Screening/tailored learning for children with disabilities</li> </ul>   |
|             | Girls' Access To Education (GATE)          | 8–15          | 15,000 OOS girls               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9-month community-based accelerated programme for foundational and life skills</li> <li>Capacity-building of local bodies, facilitators, and supervisors</li> </ul>  |
| Madagascar  | Catch-up Classes (CRAN)                    | Up to 20      | 11,000 OOSC                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2-month summer class for lower-secondary school students who recently dropped out</li> </ul>   |
|             | Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT)            | 10–18         | 9,000 students                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conditional cash transfer top-up, eligible families with children enrolled in last year of primary school or secondary</li> </ul>  |
| Liberia     | Alternative Basic Education (ABE)          | 14–20         | 215 OOSC                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Academic tutorials for 2 hours a day, 4 days a week for OOS adolescents, mainly girls and other vulnerable groups</li> <li>Training of teachers on child-centred and gender responsive pedagogy</li> <li>Provision of back-to-school packages</li> </ul> |
|             | Girls Equity in Education Programme (GEEP) | Grades 7 to 9 | 9,500 students                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>After-school remedial lessons and Girls' Clubs, including life skills and sexual and reproductive health education</li> </ul>  |
|             | Be a Change Agent Programme (BCAP)         | 10–19         | 375 OOSC                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integrated package of support services including vocational, business, life skills, literacy training</li> <li>Training and service delivery around parenting skills, sexual and reproductive health interventions, psychosocial counselling</li> </ul>  |

<sup>2</sup> Figures refer to the current Let us Learn programme's funding cycle, 2018-2021 (Phase III), up to August 2020. All figures are actuals, except for Nepal's ECD component where only a target was available at the time of writing. OOSC stands for 'out of school children'.



## 1. EDUCATION RESPONSES TO COVID-19 AND EFFECTS ON MARGINALIZED CHILDREN IN AFGHANISTAN, BANGLADESH, LIBERIA, MADAGASCAR AND NEPAL

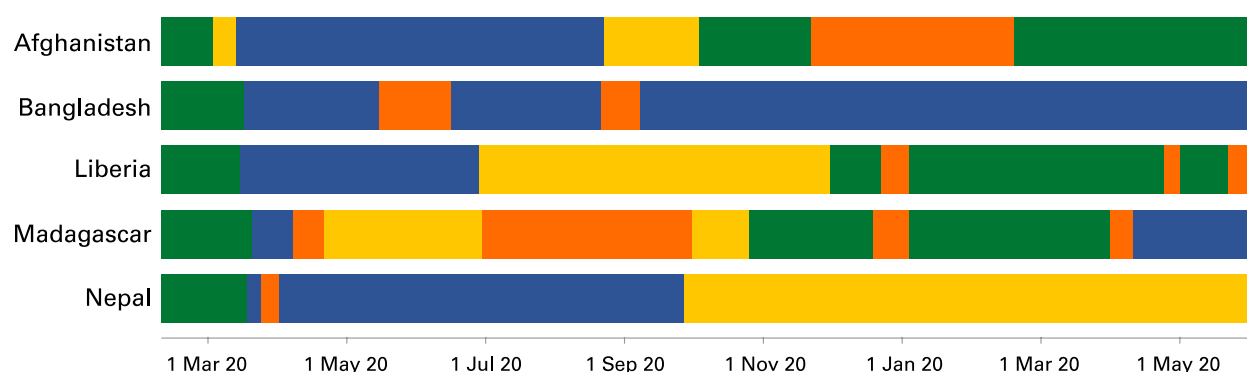
In March 2020, schools in all five LUL-supported countries closed, disrupting learning for over 65 million children from pre-primary to secondary level (UNESCO, 2020b). Education throughout 2020 and the first quarter of 2021 has been characterized by school closures, with short-lived or partial reopening complicating and disrupting children’s routines, well-being and learning (see Figure 1). In Bangladesh, schools have not reopened since the first closures in March 2020; the

Bangladeshi Government announced school reopening for 23 May 2021. In Nepal, schools have only partially reopened since the outbreak of the pandemic. Madagascar temporarily reopened schools after the 2020 school break but had to close their doors again in the second quarter of 2021. At the time of finalization of this report (May 2021), Liberia and Afghanistan (milder climate provinces) are the only two countries where schools are fully open.

National responses to continue learning during the closures in the five countries relied on a mix of remote learning modalities, including TV and radio broadcasting, digital platforms, and take-home packages, as summarized in Table 2.

**Figure 1. School closures timeline in each programme country, March 2020–May 2021.**

Data source: UNESCO global monitoring of school closures due to COVID-19



### Legend

- Academic Break
- Closed due to Covid-19
- Fully open
- Partially open

**Table 2. Overview of national remote learning packages promoted in LUL-supported countries. Based on qualitative interviews with UNICEF in-country Programme Staff and UNICEF, UNESCO & World Bank (2020)**

| Country     | Digital platforms | Radio | TV | Printed materials |
|-------------|-------------------|-------|----|-------------------|
| Afghanistan |                   | ✓     | ✓  | ✓                 |
| Bangladesh  | ✓                 | ✓     | ✓  |                   |
| Liberia     | ✓                 | ✓     | ✓  | ✓                 |
| Madagascar  |                   | ✓     | ✓  | ✓                 |
| Nepal       | ✓                 | ✓     | ✓  | ✓                 |

Each of the five countries employed at least three modalities of remote learning to reach diverse and marginalized populations (see Table 2). Nevertheless, lack of widespread access to broadcast media and internet-connected devices substantially limited the extent to which vulnerable children, especially those living in poor and remote settings, could benefit from remote learning.

In Afghanistan, a June 2020 survey in three provinces found that 53 per cent of households did not practise home schooling for their children (World Vision, 2020). According to a June 2020 survey in Madagascar, less than 2 per cent of households reported using available digital instruments<sup>3</sup> or broadcast media-based tools for remote learning (INSTAT and World Bank, 2020). In Nepal, a nationwide survey completed in July 2020 found that only 30 per cent of children were accessing the various remote learning modalities including digital (online/offline), radio, TV and printed (UNICEF-Nepal, 2020). In Bangladesh, a rapid assessment in May 2020 estimated that TV classes reached only between 10 and 15 per cent of non-formal education learners who live in remote areas.

Even when children were able to access remote learning, low levels of at-home support due to lack of time and limited education among caregivers further reduced the effectiveness of remote learning. According to UNICEF Country Office education staff in the five countries, a coherent strategy to train teachers, schools and caregivers to assist children with remote learning was lacking, due also to the rapid and widespread nature of the crisis.

As for the formal school system, LUL-supported non-formal education (NFE) programmes benefiting vulnerable out-of-school children were also heavily disrupted. In Nepal, a cohort of community-based pre-primary age learners have missed a full year, limiting their prospects to succeed in grade 1 and beyond.

In Afghanistan and Nepal, children in NFE programmes that bridge into formal school were left idle without education for months. In Liberia, new vocational skills trainees could not enrol in 2020, while graduates from the programme were also affected. A quarter of graduates engaged in small businesses became jobless, as organizations and businesses that had committed to

employ them shut down during the pandemic. Foregone income increased the financial burden for their already economically vulnerable families.

Absence from learning activities during the COVID-19 disruptions increases the likelihood that vulnerable children definitively drop out, or never enrol in education. UNICEF Country Office education staff in the five countries expressed specific concerns for NFE programme participants, who typically dropped out of school at an early age or have never engaged in formal education. Children in NFE programmes come from economically vulnerable families and were, during the crisis, more often engaged in additional chores or paid work to sustain household incomes.

Broadly speaking, analysis of MICS-6 household surveys found that children not in school are more likely to be engaged in child labour than those attending school, with the poorest children most at risk (Park et al., 2020). In Nepal, the NFE programme to support out-of-school girls to develop foundational skills and mainstream into formal school has reduced its target for mainstreaming this year to 50 per cent, down from 80 per cent in previous years. UNESCO estimates that 24 million children globally will drop out of school in the wake of the pandemic (UNESCO, 2020b). As formal schools and non-formal programmes reopen, tracking attendance and the return to learning will be crucial to understand which categories of children need extra support.

In particular, girls face increased risk of dropping out and not re-entering education. In contexts such as Afghanistan, convincing parents to enrol their daughters in learning activities requires substantial sensitization efforts in communities. According to UNICEF staff, the prolonged closures of learning centres and schools have been undermining these efforts. In addition, school closures have resulted in an increase in caregiving responsibilities for women and girls, making it harder for them to go back to school (UNICEF et al., 2020). Loss of income due to the pandemic in conjunction with a persisting bias for boys' education over girls further reduces girls' chances in continuing education. Expected increases in teenage pregnancy and early marriage during the pandemic period may also contribute to adolescent girls dropping out of education.

In Afghanistan, a recent report shows that school closures and the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic

<sup>3</sup> As shown in Table 2, digital tools were not a central part of the national remote learning response in Madagascar. Nonetheless, households may have accessed digital tools independently of the packages made available as part of the national response.

have increased the likelihood of reliance on harmful practices such as child marriage (UN Women et al., 2020). Globally, it is estimated that the pandemic could result in an increase of 1 million adolescent pregnancies in 2020 and put 2.5 million girls at risk of child marriage over the next five years (Szabo and Edwards, 2020).

Closures of learning centres not only interrupt children's learning but close off delivery points for key services such as protection and nutrition. In Madagascar, children's clubs and after-school life skills sessions serve as platforms where children who are at risk of violence are identified. Facilitators are trained to refer children who are suffering from violence to the relevant authorities. Suspension of the clubs meant that these identification and referral mechanisms came to a halt. In Afghanistan, the closure of Accelerated Learning Centres (ALCs) meant learners could no longer benefit from weekly iron and folic acid supplementation. A survey conducted in the Herat Province in July–August 2020 found that household expenditure dropped in 88 per cent of households (ATR Consulting, 2020). Households' coping mechanisms included reducing expenditure on food items, with implications in terms of the diversity of their children's diet and their long-term development.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, learning centres, particularly for out-of-school children attending NFE programmes, constitute one of the few spaces where children can safely spend time playing with their peers and engaging in recreational activities.

"[Learning centres are] the only opportunity for these children to be free, to think positive, to dream, to interact with their peers. Maybe from a programme eye this is not obvious, but [...] perhaps this is more important than the question of learning. Many times, this cannot be highlighted in the programme document, but this is a huge missed opportunity for the children."

–LUL Programme Staff, UNICEF Bangladesh

## 2. ADAPTATIONS TO LUL PROGRAMMES TO SUPPORT VULNERABLE CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND WELL-BEING

Against this backdrop, LUL programmes introduced measures to support marginalized children during COVID-19 restrictions. This section examines such adaptations and highlights some promising practices in continuing education and support for marginalized children.

### Extending the reach of remote learning during school closures

As in-person learning came to a halt, LUL programmes relied on low-tech interventions and increased communication with communities to keep children engaged and boost uptake of accessible, paper-based learning materials. UNICEF Bangladesh used mobile phone calls to stay connected to NFE learners and their families, support learning and pass on messages about COVID-19 preventive measures. A rapid survey of beneficiaries of the Ability Based Accelerated Learning (ABAL) and Pre-Primary Education (PPE) programmes in Bangladesh found that over 95 per cent of beneficiary households could be reached via basic feature mobile phones, a much larger share than those who had access to broadcast media or internet-connected devices.<sup>5</sup> LUL facilitators called learners for ten minutes every two days. The first three minutes of calls provided information on COVID-19 and general psychosocial support. The remaining time was used to give children individual support on learning activities. For primary-level ABAL students, teachers emphasized basic skills and provided follow-on guidance on paper-based learning materials that were distributed as part of the programme. According to programme staff, this communication approach reached 70–80 per cent of learners at least three times a week and was key to keeping learners and their families engaged, leading to reduced programme dropout and mitigating learning loss during school closure.

In Afghanistan, LUL teachers, who continued to receive their salaries during school closures, were engaged in the door-to-door distribution of reading materials to learners in their communities. Teachers participated, along with parents, in community sensitization efforts to spread awareness on COVID-19 and to encourage families to keep students enrolled in the Accelerated

<sup>4</sup> For a recent review of the nutrition impacts on children in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic see Borkowski et al. (2021).

<sup>5</sup> A rapid survey carried out in Bangladesh in May 2020 found that less than 1 per cent of PPE and ABAL families owned a radio, and only between 10 and 22 per cent had a television at home.

Learning Centres (ALCs) for the following year. Similarly, in Liberia, LUL-trained community members informed and sensitized caregivers about take-home learning materials (grade 1 to 12), which could be picked up at designated schools as part of the national remote learning strategy. These community-based learning support and sensitization initiatives were not, however, always carried out systematically, in part due to the differing and rapidly evolving COVID-19 prevention measures in target areas. Reinforcing monitoring and feedback mechanisms from the field to understand who has received support and who has not, particularly among the most vulnerable categories of children, is therefore crucial to inform future planning and implementation.

With the onset of the pandemic and school closures, some LUL resources were repurposed in Liberia and Madagascar to support the government's national remote learning response. In Liberia, these resources contributed to the development of a radio-based remote learning programme, which encompassed the distribution of radios to disadvantaged households, and an e-learning studio. This will allow the Ministry of Education to produce and record high-quality lessons to be deployed without delay to ensure the continuation of remote learning during future emergency situations, as well as serve as guides for teachers. 650,000 children have since been reached through the radio programme. In Madagascar, reprogrammed LUL resources were used to help the government produce and distribute self-directed learning booklets to all lower-secondary school students in the country. Learning materials from LUL-supported Catch-up Classes were adapted to develop these paper-based materials.

### **Continued support to caregivers**

Some LUL programmes continued supporting families of beneficiaries through remote provision of caregiver support and targeted cash transfers. In Nepal, parenting education classes for caregivers of PPE students were converted into a radio programme format – which expanded its reach from LUL beneficiaries to the broader population in the radio's catchment areas. The radio programme provided parenting education messages, including guidance on different activities that caregivers could do at home to promote children's stimulation and learning. LUL mentors conducted phone follow-ups with parents to ask them whether they found the episode useful and if they practised with their children. However, engagement with the radio format remains a challenge. A survey on the programme uptake revealed that 62 per cent of respondents

followed the radio programme, but only 14 per cent listened to all episodes while 23 per cent listened often (Seto Gurans NCDS, 2020). Of the sub-sample of parents who listened to the radio programme, 54 per cent of respondents applied the guidelines provided during the broadcast with their children regularly and 40 per cent sometimes, while a limited share of 6 per cent did not do so at all.

Mothers of ABAL learners in Bangladesh continued receiving a monthly stipend via mobile money, even though in-person learning activities were halted. This measure not only provided an incentive to keep children enrolled in the programme and engaged in learning at home, but also helped families sustain their livelihoods during the pandemic-induced economic downturn.

Madagascar's LUL-supported conditional cash transfer, which is implemented jointly with the World Bank, continued during the lockdowns. With the closure of schools, the cash transfer's conditionality on school attendance was lifted. Payments continued to be made as normal, largely through collection points for beneficiaries, since mobile coverage and payment options are limited in target areas. Precautionary measures, such as hand sanitizing and provision of masks for those involved in the distribution, and communication activities for the transfer, were put in place.

### **Supporting psychosocial support and child protection for children during school closures**

Schools and learning centres not only provide educational services but also deliver many other essential services for children, including psychosocial support and child protection. In Liberia, LUL resources were used to reinforce the capacity of community-based child protection organizations such as the Child Welfare Committees, which detect and refer cases of children affected by violence and COVID-19 to relevant service providers including community-based mental health and psychosocial support services.

### **Adapting to safely continue in-person learning in small groups**

Where it was possible to conduct in-person learning activities safely, LUL programmes adopted community-based approaches to continue teaching and teacher training. In rural areas in Nepal with low COVID-19 transmission rates, early grade learning activities could continue through community-based 'Learning Circles', moving education out of classrooms into small outdoor groups based on learning levels. The Learning Circles

initially developed organically – rather than as part of a harmonized implementation package – with the support of community-based organizations and local administration leaders who had been trained by UNICEF. As a response to school closures in communities where capacity for teachers alone to conduct the Learning Circles was limited, LUL partners mobilized local adolescents, called ‘Young Champions’, to support implementation. Initial qualitative evidence suggests that such strategies mitigated learning loss for early grade learners who lost access to education due to school closures.

The Learning Circles provide an example of how adaptations forced by the pandemic allowed learners to work in smaller groups with more tailored instruction, a pedagogical approach that has been documented to contribute to learning gains (Pershad et al., 2020; Cabezas et al., 2017; Duflo and Kiessel, 2015). Learning Circles also served as a forum to continue supporting particularly vulnerable categories of children, notably children with disabilities. Thanks to the smaller group setting, teachers who had been trained on inclusive education were able to provide support to children with disabilities more easily than would often be the case in larger classrooms.

Similarly, in Nepal, programme training activities were also able to resume in smaller-sized groups. For example, workshops for teachers involved in preparing books in local mother-tongue languages resumed in groups of five to six people being trained within a local government office, with remote video facilitation and follow-up support extended via phone.

In Liberia, trained Adolescent Peer Educators helped teach life skills at the community level and raised awareness on COVID-19 prevention and response. Instead of gathering adolescents and community residents in large numbers in designated centres, Adolescent Peer Educators received WASH materials and reached out to households and community residents at open-air marketplaces to deliver the training and sensitization.

### **Post-school reopening: Bringing out-of-school children, especially girls, back to school**

Bangladesh plans to conduct a community-level campaign targeting parents and local leaders with the goal of bringing children back to non-formal learning centres, at PPE and primary level. In Madagascar, the scale-up of LUL-supported Catch-up Classes nationwide was accelerated to facilitate children’s return to lower-secondary school.

LUL programmes are also working to facilitate mainstreaming from non-formal learning centres into formal school. UNICEF Bangladesh is working in tandem with the Ministry of Education to ensure ABAL learners benefit from the same adjustments the government may make to auto-promote students in the formal school system. Similarly, in Nepal, plans are being discussed to allow Girls’ Access to Education (GATE) programme participants to mainstream into formal school once they reopen, even though they were not able to complete the full NFE programme due to the pandemic.

With the reopening of schools, Liberia is planning to restart the Girls’ Clubs programme, which typically provided tutoring, life skills and health education, with an add-on livelihood component that provides seed money for girls to launch school-based income-generating projects. This financial incentive is expected to encourage girls to return to school and to remain in school. More broadly, the Liberia programme intends to place additional emphasis on livelihoods, to compensate for the added strain that the COVID-19 pandemic is putting on already vulnerable families. Provisions are being made for adolescent mothers who are at risk of dropping out due to family-related obligations and social stigma. In this respect, childcare services will be offered to young mothers who are attending skills or vocational training.

### **Mitigating learning loss through in-school remedial programmes**

Several LUL NFE programmes had to stop or reduce their module duration to fit within the revised school calendars, meaning that learners who could not complete their programmes will transfer to formal school or continue their NFE path without having achieved the full competences that would be necessary to progress and learn. To compensate for that, Catch-up Classes in Madagascar will provide extra after-school support for children who mainstream during the next school year. Similarly, GATE in Nepal plans to provide supplemental support to girls once they mainstream by establishing homework clubs, while increasing the learning hours per day from two to three. In addition, UNICEF Nepal is planning to redeploy GATE teachers to serve as assistants in schools that are in need of additional personnel after the COVID-19 pandemic. As schools reopen in Liberia, UNICEF is scaling up the remedial classes to additional schools to mitigate the learning losses experienced during the pandemic. These catch-up classes provide an additional two hours of instruction at the end of the normal school day and will continue until the academic year is completed.



### 3. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences of LUL programmes during COVID-19 provide several lessons in supporting learning for the most vulnerable learners during crises where schools and learning centres close. This report highlights recommendations for governments and other education actors to build equitable and resilient education systems that are able to respond quickly during times of crisis:

- **Engage learners with technology they use, monitor learning and provide follow-up support to users of remote learning.** Feature phone-based support, as used in Bangladesh, and take-home packages are the most accessible remote learning strategies for vulnerable learners. However, training and supporting teachers, caregivers and other community-based actors is a fundamental prerequisite to ensure children learn effectively at home. These actors should receive clear and tailored guidelines on how children, including children with disabilities, can be supported to learn at home. Systematically monitoring take-up and assessing learning is crucial to understand the relevance and effectiveness of remote learning packages among marginalized children and to scale up practices that proved successful.
- **Leverage community-based approaches to provide education support and continue child protection and health services while schools are closed.** Community mobilization has been a key enabling factor to reduce future dropout and spread awareness about remote learning. Local organizations, partners and programme teachers/facilitators should be supported and trained to deliver child protection and health services typically provided in schools, including identification and referral of victims of violence to relevant services, delivery of psychosocial support and supply of take-home food rations (or food vouchers) and fortifiers. Capacity-building of local Child Welfare Committees for detecting and referring children to psychosocial and mental health services in Liberia; and the engagement of young community leaders in Nepal to support Learning Circles for children in communities where schools are closed and time of teachers was limited, are two examples of successful community mobilization to support children's learning and well-being.
- **Create smaller learning groups in communities that promote tailored instruction.** Initiatives such

as the Learning Circles in Nepal have provided a safe way for children to continue education in their communities when schools were closed. This community-led programme facilitated more tailored instruction than would be possible in larger classroom settings. These platforms provided individualized support to particularly marginalized categories, such as children with disabilities (CwD). Training teachers and local actors to deliver such support to CwD within their communities should be a priority action to promote continued education for children who require additional support.

- **Support vulnerable households and teachers through continuation of cash transfers and payment of salaries.** Continued financial support amid the pandemic decreased the opportunity cost of beneficiaries and teachers to drop out from programmes, partially compensated for income loss caused by the lockdowns and mitigated the impacts of foregone services delivered at learning centres and school, such as in the realm of nutrition (e.g., school feeding programmes) and health. Continued remuneration of programme teachers also enabled them to be re-deployed to provide learning and health awareness support within their community, as in Afghanistan.

As schools reopen, providing learning pathways that teach at the right level for out-of-school children and supporting in-school marginalized children will be more important than ever. In managing reopening, it will be critical for governments and education actors to:

- **Bring vulnerable children back to school: scale up community-based learning pathways for out-of-school children including those who have dropped out during school closures.** Flexible learning hours accommodate learners who need to work, while community-based learning centres reduce distance to school, boosting the chances of keeping learners and parents engaged. Accelerated remedial programmes, such as the Catch-up Classes in Madagascar and ability-based programmes – such as ABAL in Bangladesh, GATE in Nepal and ALC in Afghanistan – are showing promising results in terms of learning gains in foundational and life skills. Ability-based teaching also has built-in mechanisms to measure learning loss accrued during the lockdowns and provide training accordingly. Tracking return to school and OOSC through reinforced Educational Management Information System (EMIS) and programme's

monitoring systems will be crucial to understand which categories of vulnerable students are not able to resume schooling and provide them with extra support.

- **Open school doors wide: enable the fast transition into formal school for out-of-school non-formal learners.** As most NFE programmes were interrupted, it was uncertain whether and how these learners could transfer to formal school without having completed their full curricula. As done in Bangladesh and Nepal, it is important to facilitate the mainstreaming of NFE learners, including those who could not complete their programme entirely, into formal school through defining clear and reasonable rules for allowing that transfer. Moving forward, government and non-government education providers should further coordinate to ensure clear pathways for out-of-school NFE learners to enter school, receive accreditation and acquire foundational and life skills.
- **Mitigate learning loss through scaling remedial education during and after-school.** As schools reopen, children will return with varying degrees of learning loss. It is imperative that additional support be given to children both in-school and in NFE programmes to support them during this transition back to the classroom. In Liberia, Madagascar and Nepal, LUL programmes plan to provide tailored, remedial support to students who are behind or are at risk of dropout through after-school programmes, drawing from successful NFE programmes.
- **Learn from innovations made during COVID-19 to build resilience for future emergencies and address existing education gaps.** The experience of responding to the widespread school closures has resulted in adaptations and innovations relevant to future emergencies. For instance, the mobile phone-based support system could continue to be used in Bangladesh during seasonal flooding that causes recurrent school closures. Further, the use of accelerated curricula such as those adopted by LUL to reach out-of-school children served as a useful starting point for the development of remote learning materials to mitigate learning loss during times of emergencies and rapidly roll-out remedial learning support afterwards. COVID-19 also exposed weaknesses in the system's readiness to face prolonged school closures: governments and NFE actors should prioritize contingency planning, building on their experience in responding to COVID-19 education system closures.

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## ANNEX: RESEARCH METHODS

Through a series of semi-structured interviews with UNICEF Education and Child Protection staff from the five LUL-supported Country Offices and document review of the COVID-19 response studies, this brief constitutes an initial effort to understand how the different programme components supported by LUL have been affected by the pandemic and what possible lessons can be drawn to strengthen delivery in the context of future emergencies. The following questions served as a guide for our research efforts:

1. How has COVID-19 disrupted the implementation and delivery of LUL programme components?
2. What measures have been taken to ensure the continuity of learning and/or well-being of participating LUL children during these disruptions?
3. How is the disruption impacting LUL participants' education outcomes and well-being?
4. What are some of the lessons learned from the LUL response to COVID-19 that can be helpful to other countries that support similar formal and non-formal education programmes targeting the most vulnerable children?

All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent. The interviews were held remotely and lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. Participants were asked the same broad questions as per semi-structured interviews; however, some room was also provided for additional questions specific to each country context.

Interview notes and documents reviewed were analysed through thematic content analysis, which encompassed the iterative coding of the insights obtained.