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RESILIENCE IN RETURN TO LEARNING DURING COVID-19

FIVE-COUNTRY SYNTHESIS REPORT

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PREPARED BY

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This report is dedicated to the tireless teachers, learners, and parents around the world who continue to endure this global emergency.

CONTENTS

EXHIBITS

ACRONYMS

ECE	Early childhood education
EIEWG	Education in Emergencies Working Group (Nigeria)
GE	General education
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
HE	Higher education
NGO	Non-governmental organization
MEHE	Ministry of Education and Higher Education
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoES	Ministry of Education and Sciences
NFE	Non-formal education
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
RERA	Rapid Education and Risk Analysis
RtL	Return to learning
SUBEB	State Universal Basic Education Board (Nigeria)
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VET	Vocational Education and Training
ZANEC	Zambia National Education Coalition

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 presented an unprecedented challenge to education systems worldwide as countries began the process of return to learning for the nearly 1.6 billion learners whose education was affected by the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 (Boisvert and Weisenhorn 2020). Global school closures interrupted and influenced children's learning, well-being, and protection; these impacts disproportionately impacted the most marginalized learners. A focus on resilience and "building back better" (USAID 2012)[1] have underpinned national school reopening strategies and the various frameworks guiding such processes, and have a strong commitment to ensuring that those already marginalized prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were not made more vulnerable because of it. These concepts speak directly to USAID's education and resilience white paper, which argues that:

- Exposure to a shock like COVID-19, alongside the sensitivity of specific learner populations to its impacts, is not uniform across or within countries. As such, it is essential to identify which learners are at greatest risk of losing access to equitable, quality learning because of the pandemic, alongside the other intersecting shocks and stressors in that location.
- Underpinning pathways of education sector resilience to a shock like COVID-19 are a series of capacities, processes, norms, and practices embodied in the actions of actors within that system (including learners, educators, schools, communities, and institutions.) It is these dynamics that are critical to examine to understand how learning continuity and improvement are supported in the midst of crisis so that national education systems can build on these "pockets of promise."
- A resilient education system is important not only for learners but for society as a whole. Education has the potential to support and strengthen societal capacity to respond to ongoing and emerging shocks and stressors.

In the early stages of the pandemic (mid-2020), USAID, under the Education Support Initiative, identified the opportunity to document COVID-19 responses in the education sector across a range of diverse national contexts. This included emphasis on the ways in which the global pandemic could be viewed as an opportunity to redouble efforts to understand and address the needs of the most vulnerable and to centrally position the education sector among wider national recovery plans and strategies. Accordingly, USAID commissioned case study research to describe and document examples of the return to learning (RtL) process up to mid-2021. In addition, these case studies would examine how USAID's Resilience Framework could be understood in relation to pathways of resilience and vulnerability during the initial fourteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shah 2019).

This report synthesizes a collection of five case studies that examined this RtL process across the education life cycle (pre-primary through higher education) during the COVID-19 pandemic in

[1] USAID defines resilience as the "ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth."

Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia.[2] Each case study examines, describes, and analyzes the specific localized processes and decision-making of education system stakeholders from March 2020 to April 2021. While the case studies serve as a small window into a much larger crisis and, at the time of writing (June 2021), focus only on the still relatively early stages of an ongoing global crisis, they nonetheless provide important insights into how we can think about and work toward increased education system resilience.

METHOD

The research team was comprised of four international consultants (three researchers and one technical advisor) who served as the core team, and one local consultant per case study country.[3] One core team researcher served as the main point of contact for each local consultant. The study comprised three phases: (1) inception, (2) document collection and review, and (3) primary data collection through key informant interviews with stakeholders in the education sector—from government agencies, donor agencies, universities, NGOs, civil society organizations, and the private sector—over a series of four "waves." After each wave, the local and international research teams convened to discuss emerging findings, and to recalibrate the research questions and sample set for subsequent waves. In total, 234 interviews were conducted across the five case study locations.

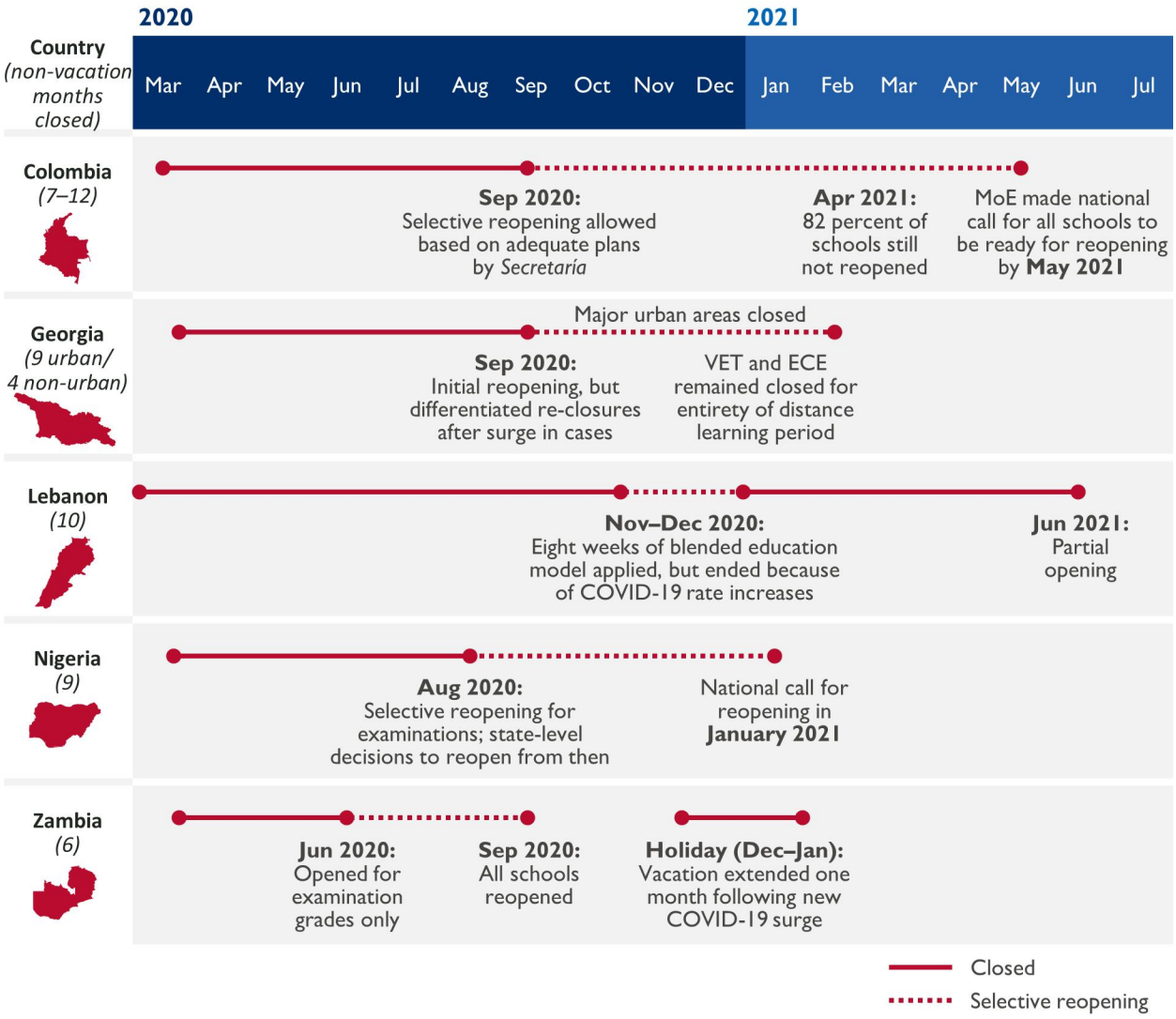
PATHWAYS OF RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The five countries had varying timelines of school closures and reopening, summarized in Exhibit 1 below.

[2] Throughout this report, "return to learning" or "RtL" is referred to when describing the broad effort to get learners back into some capacity of in-person education, as the modality was prior to the COVID-19 closures, and the "RtL process" refers to the various steps in getting there, which may not necessarily include, at that moment, in-person learning. When referring to the periods before actual return to in-person learning or complementary to a partial return to in-person learning (e.g., distance education), as relevant, specific terminology to refer to the type of distance education is utilized: "preventing dropout" refers to steps to engage learners to whatever degree during closures to keep them interested; "preventing learning loss" is used to refer to concretely educational activities that were utilized during closures.

[3] In the Nigeria case study, an additional local consultant was brought on to support outreach to and interviews with the state-level government agencies.

Exhibit 1. Timeline of school closures, reopening, total months closed (public primary and secondary schools)



The trajectories across all case study locations were reflective of an emergent understanding of COVID-19 and its impacts. For example, all countries initially responded with an emphasis on hygiene, handwashing, cleaning surfaces, and closing non-essential businesses and institutions; by mid- 2020, there was growing global realization that the shock of COVID-19 was not abating as quickly as initially expected, and national responses began to shift accordingly. It is within this dynamic context that initial education sector response efforts in each of the five study countries worked toward four common objectives:

1. ***Minimize exposure and impact of the virus***
   - Schools were closed within the first weeks of COVID-19 identification in each country in order to reduce spread of the virus. This measure protected the health and safety of teachers, learners, and communities by minimizing exposure to COVID-19.

- Inter-agency and cross-sector coalitions were established in the first weeks of response to plan for and respond to COVID-19 in the education sector.

2. ***Plan approaches and processes for the continuity of learning during school closure***
   - In seeking to minimize the impact of disrupted learning during school closures, various modalities of distance learning were deployed (relatively) swiftly across the five case study locations.
   - As it became clear that distance education would continue for longer than initially anticipated—alongside identification of significant challenges to reaching all learners and ensuring quality of distance education—the distance modalities were further developed, and strategies were deployed to better engage marginalized learners who lacked access to such modalities.
3. ***Ensure safety of learners, teachers, and communities for return to in-person learning***
   - Across all five case study locations, plans for the return to in-person learning were drafted in the months following initial school closures. The variation in prescriptiveness of the plans was in part a reflection of the structure of the education system pre-COVID-19 (e.g., centralized or decentralized).
   - In seeking to ensure safety for the return to in-person learning, national guidance was produced for safe return to in-person learning, and school personnel were provided training in health protocols during COVID-19.
   - In preparation for a swift return to school—which, in most cases, actually took many months of preparation—countries and municipalities deployed measures to monitor readiness for and implementation of safety measures during in-person learning.
4. ***Transition back to in-person learning for all***
   - The countries studied here made varying efforts to identify and accommodate marginalized groups in their reopening policies, including targeting marginalized learners in assessments prior to reopening.
   - Models of return in each context were largely dictated by public health policies, in particular, physical distancing requirements and the need for fewer learners and teachers in schools and classrooms at one time. This resulted in most countries instituting hybrid models of return, which blended in-person with distance learning.
   - With the new models of instruction and scheduling came necessary and sometimes innovative modifications in teaching and learning; however, these adaptations were not prioritized in the RtL process, and, as of April 2021, had not been sufficiently resourced for uptake, scaling, or institutionalization across education systems.

Efforts to minimize the impacts of COVID-19, particularly in the initial period of response, largely focused on absorbing the shock. Through school closure, responses sought first to minimize exposure to COVID-19 for learners, educators, and community members in educational settings. As it became clear that these closures would be more prolonged, attention turned to minimizing the risk that there would be permanent, negative impacts on participation, learning, and the education workforce. Such initial attention was largely focused on minimizing impact, as well as deploying expertise, resources, and assets mostly already known and available, rather than innovating or recognizing and scaling new assets, networks, and capacities that emerged during the pandemic.

POCKETS OF PROMISE

While actions during the initial period of response were largely absorptive in nature, all case studies also encountered numerous examples of education stakeholders leveraging the expertise, resources, and mechanisms available to them to adapt responses as the pandemic continued. Examples of such actions—more adaptive in nature—were identified during the research and are described here as "pockets of promise," as they present opportunities for further engagement and development moving forward in order to maintain or accelerate progress toward education outcomes. Such pockets of promise can be understood throughout this research at two levels: (a) the national/institutional level, and (b) the sub-national level.

National/Institutional: All five countries drafted national COVID-19 response plans and policy. Some were able to leverage the planning processes to address institutional weaknesses by building on existing resilience capacities, such as:

- Mobilizing connections and relationships (such as working groups)
- Leveraging decentralized structures
- National-level recognition of school-level leadership
- Response plans leveraging capacities

***Sub-national level*:** Sub-national government structures, civil society, teachers, and parents were central to responses across all case study locations, both in translating national plans to a local level and in innovating to fill teaching and learning gaps not yet identified or accounted for at an institutional level. Where sub-national stakeholders identified a gap in support (or slow movement toward addressing that gap), they often acted quickly and effectively to respond themselves.

APPLYING A RESILIENCE LENS TO COVID-19 RESPONSE EFFORTS

In addition to documenting the institution-level RtL process in five countries, for this research a "resilience lens" was applied to both the iteration of the lines of inquiry for each wave of data collection and the overarching analysis. A framework of resilience—as put forth in the USAID education and resilience white paper—was used to better understand (a) how systems and stakeholders understood and responded to COVID-19 as either a discrete event/shock or as a shock-turned-stressor that sat on top of other risk factors already known and prevalent in the system; and (b) the ways in which relationships, networks, and assets that existed across the education system could be leveraged and connected to each other to frame effective responses aimed to mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on learning outcomes, specifically.

In many ways, by June 2021, it was still too early to definitively comment on COVID-19 impacts on the education sector or the resilience of systems more broadly. The case studies highlight specific short-term impacts, but the longer-term effects of COVID-19 (in terms of learning and broader socioeconomic recovery) will not be truly understood for years. Still, the research has led to several important findings, insights, and recommendations that may be of use to education stakeholders eager to further conceptualize resilience.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

COVID-19 must be understood today as more of a long-term stressor on education systems globally than just an acute shock.

- **The Center for Education and other Bureaus** should consider revisions to the return to learning framework that focus on a continuum of preparedness, response and recovery that highlights how education systems might respond differently to COVID-19 given intersections with other chronic stressors, and its impact on educational access and engagement. This is particularly important in many of the multi-hazard, complex crises contexts where COVID-19 is just one of many ongoing stressors on education (and other) systems.
- Intersections among health, social protection, livelihoods, and education programming are important for **Ministries of Education and Higher Education, and their partners** to consider when weighing current and potential future risks to investments. A longer-term approach to address stressors should align humanitarian and development focused structures and identify collective priorities.

The resilience of the education system during COVID-19 was deeply interconnected with other, ongoing shocks and stressors specific to that location.

- Emphasize risk-informed planning and processes aligned with the recommendations of the education and resilience white paper. The **Center for Education** should continue to strengthen utilization of analytical tools to capture dimensions of risk and resilience and to reevaluate and refer back to such work as part of formulating responses to any shock.
- When responding to a crisis like COVID-19, **AORs and CORs** should ensure immediate assessments and analyses are considered alongside sectoral and country-level assessments of risks and incentives, as well as capacities for change. This strategy may require additional training and will necessitate joint understanding of the key vulnerabilities facing the education system, institutions, and communities among in-country partners.

When responding to shocks like COVID-19, a starting point for response efforts should be understanding which populations are most exposed and most sensitive to the particular set of risk factors present.

- Starting with the acknowledgement that the pandemic has not affected all learners and communities equally, the **Center for Education** should place more emphasis on understanding and using concepts of exposure and sensitivity to better focus resilience (and equity-focused) programming.
- Ensure that priorities and actions of **USAID Missions, partners, and ministries** are differentiated and responding to evidence on who the most marginalized populations are. Emphasize how such responses will reduce these populations' exposure to health and education-related risks and reduce their sensitivity to the effects to school closures and the continuance of hybrid modalities of learning.

Pre-crisis resilience capacities significantly impact resilience trajectories.

- As the **Center for Education and USAID** continue to support uptake and utilization of the resilience white paper, it is important to emphasize that resilience capacities do not manifest in the same way across contexts; the ability to protect learning and well-being outcomes may be mediated by the complexity, intensity, duration, and scale of a given shock or set of stressors. Local strategies, networks, and supports to learners must be linked up and reinforced by institutional, structural, and staff approaches that reinforce a process that shifts as the crisis itself evolves. Programs must be planned and managed in a way that enables such flexibility.
- When tracking and assessing the impact of prior resilience-focused investments, it is important that **USAID Missions** understand successes as well as barriers and challenges that require specific attention to address and resolve.

There is an opportunity to incorporate more adaptive and transformative solutions for endemic educational challenges within national systems.

- **USAID/Washington** should continue to capture, document, and institutionalize learning from the experiences of COVID-19 response (and other shocks/stressors), to feed into future crisis response planning or policy at an agency level.
- **USAID Missions** should seek to understand how and why specific communities, populations, or systems were able to maintain well-being and learning outcomes in the midst of the pandemic and consider how these mechanisms could be better supported within national priorities and planning. Identify the adaptations and shifts to school closures and disruption that might improve overall well-being and learning outcomes beyond the crisis.

A diversity of actors and approaches across the education system—as well as redundancy and multiple entry points to address specific challenges—support resilience of the education system as a whole.

- In future education policies and strategies, **USAID** should emphasize the importance of working in partnership with local civil society and non-government partners alongside strategic investments with government and systems-strengthening. Sub-national and local investment ensure both bottom-up accountability and appropriate support for decentralized structures, systems, and decision-making.
- Diverse perspectives and views are essential when considering appropriate responses to COVID-19-related vulnerabilities. **USAID Missions** should convene and make investments in localized networks, organizations, and structures whose actions addressed needs of learners outside of ministry-led responses, emphasizing these activities as complementary to, rather than in competition with, ministry-led responses and priorities.

Building resilience is a long-term, cross-sectoral, and context-specific process.

- The **Center for Education** can leverage the flexibility of the Agency's 2018 Education Policy to work with other sectors and include "macro" vulnerabilities and vulnerability pathways in the resilience framework.

- Maintaining and improving well-being in the midst of a crisis and strengthening social protection, health, livelihoods, and governance sectors can have important, positive impacts on resilience outcomes for the education system. **USAID Missions** need to recognize that investments in the education "system" extend beyond the education sector. Similarly, investments in the education sector can support these other systems.

As countries and the global economy work toward recovery from COVID-19, the relationship between education system resilience and wider societal resilience will (and should) be further emphasized.

- Future **Agency** guidance and policy should reinforce the critical role education plays in times of crisis in strengthening social capital and continue to track how return to learning processes are both mediated by and influence issues like trust in government overall.
- Ensure programs and strategies designed by **USAID Missions, partners, and ministries** to strengthen institutional governance and public trust include investments in education, especially in mechanisms that support bottom-up accountability and voice of local education stakeholders (parents, community leaders, educators).

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 AND EDUCATION SYSTEMS

COVID-19 presented an unprecedented challenge to education systems worldwide as countries began the process of return to learning for the nearly 1.6 billion learners whose education was affected by the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 (Boisvert and Weisenhorn 2020). Global school closures interrupted and influenced children's learning, well-being, and protection; these impacts were particularly significant for the most marginalized learners. A strong focus on resilience and "building back better" (USAID 2012)[4] has underpinned national school reopening strategies and the various frameworks guiding such processes, and has a strong commitment to ensuring that those already marginalized prior to COVID-19 were not made more vulnerable because of it. These concepts speak directly to USAID's education and resilience white paper, which argues that:

- Exposure to a shock, alongside the sensitivity of specific learner populations to its impacts, is not uniform across or within countries. This is because acute shock does not exist in isolation from other longer-term stressors (such as poverty, food insecurity, displacement status, and climate variability), or shocks (such as acute armed conflict and natural disasters). The impact of such events on individuals with particular vulnerabilities (in a rural or remote location, indigenous peoples, people of different genders, persons with disabilities, or refugees or those with a particular immigration status) must also be considered. An equitable education system must ensure that no learners are made worse off by an acute shock; this requires education system stakeholders to identify which learners are at greatest risk of losing access to equitable, quality learning, and to respond accordingly in contexts of intersecting shocks and stressors.
- Underpinning pathways of education sector resilience to a shock are a series of capacities, processes, norms, and practices embodied in the actions of actors within that system (including learners, educators, schools, communities, and institutions.) It is these dynamics that are critical to examine in order to understand how learning continuity and improvement are supported in the midst of crisis so that national education systems can build on these "pockets of promise." Notably, there are varying resilience capacities across levels of an education system, which leverage relationships and assets that may have been present pre-crisis.[5] Examining these dynamics is critical to understand how learning continuity and improvement can occur in the midst of crisis. Ultimately, this may allow national education systems to build on these "pockets of promise" to ensure that isolated practices of community, school, or institutional resilience become more common practice.

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[4] USAID defines resilience in education as the "ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth."
[5] There are three resilience capacities commonly referred to, and utilized throughout this report. Absorptive capacity is "the ability of individuals, households, communities, or institutions to minimize exposure and sensitivity to shocks and stressors through preventative measures and appropriate coping strategies to avoid permanent, negative impacts." Adaptive capacity is "the ability of individuals, households, communities, or institutions to make informed choices and changes in livelihood and other strategies in response to longer-term social, economic, and environmental change." Transformative capacity is "the ability of communities and institutions to establish an enabling environment for systemic change through their governance mechanisms policies and regulations, cultural and gender norms, community networks, and formal and informal social protection mechanisms" (Shah 2019).

- A resilient education system is important not only for learners but for society as a whole. Education has the potential to support and strengthen societal capacity to respond to ongoing and emerging shocks and stressors.

In the early stages of the pandemic (mid-2020), USAID, under the Education Support Initiative, identified the opportunity to document COVID-19 response across a range of diverse national contexts and the education continuum. This included ways in which the global pandemic could be viewed as an opportunity to redouble efforts to understand and address the needs of the most vulnerable, as well as to centrally position the education sector among wider national recovery plans and strategies. Accordingly, USAID commissioned case study research to describe and document examples of the return to learning process up to mid-2021. In addition, these case studies would examine how USAID's Resilience Framework could be understood in relation to pathways of resilience and vulnerability during the initial fourteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shah 2019).

THE RESEARCH

This report synthesizes a collection of five case studies that examined the return to learning (RtL)[6] process during COVID-19 in Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia. Each case study examines, describes, and analyzes the specific localized processes and decision-making of education system actors from March 2020 to April 2021.

The purpose of the research was to (a) document the processes of continued learner engagement during closures, followed by the reopening of schools across a range of diverse national contexts and alongside multiple ongoing shocks and stressors; (b) capture the perspectives and learning of education stakeholders and institutions in order to understand how systems absorbed and adapted to the dynamic context of the COVID-19 pandemic; and (c) examine the ways in which education was positioned as a key sector in support of national resilience and recovery efforts. The research was informed by USAID's return to learning framework (Boisvert and Weisenhorn 2020), which largely structured the thematic lines of inquiry for the case studies (Appendix C), as well as USAID's resilience white paper (Shah 2019), which framed the overall methods and analysis; it was ultimately guided by seven research questions (Appendix B). This synthesis report is accompanied by five country-specific case studies.

This report—directed at global education stakeholders including donors, implementing partners, and researchers—is one of many contributions of evidence documenting the COVID-19 period. It is unique in its purposeful aim to apply a resilience lens to methods, findings, and analysis, namely by employing a strengths-based approach to understanding education systems' response to COVID-19. This approach sought to document how systems were able to leverage pre-existing capacities to respond to the crisis in unique and context-specific ways. This research is positioned to contribute to documentation of education system response to COVID-19 and—uniquely—to contribute to literature that explores

[6] Throughout this report, "return to learning" or "RtL" is referred to when describing the broad effort to get learners back into some capacity of in-person education, as the modality was prior to the COVID-19 closures, and the "RtL process" refers to the various steps in getting there which may not necessarily include, at that moment, in-person learning. When referring to the periods before actual return to in-person learning or complementary to a partial return to in-person learning (e.g., distance education), as relevant specific terminology to refer to the type of distance education is utilized: "preventing dropout" refers to steps to engage learners to whatever degree during closures to keep them interested; "preventing learning loss" is used to refer to concretely educational activities that were utilized during closures.

the relationship between resilience and education broadly. As a synthesis of case studies, this report provides real-world examples and descriptions of the return to learning process with application of a resilience lens to help education stakeholders *think more concretely about resilience* in education going forward.

The report is organized into three main sections. First, it compares strengths and challenges across the five case study locations' return to learning processes. It then presents key resilience learning that offers synthesis across the case studies related to key elements of the education and resilience white paper. This includes considerations of how lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic may be used as an opportunity for further resilience strengthening efforts and, more importantly, why education should remain a priority sector in this work. A final section provides concrete recommendations based on the findings.

2. METHOD

The research team was comprised of four international consultants (three researchers and one technical advisor) who served as the core team, and one local consultant per case study country.[7] One core team researcher served as the main point of contact for each local consultant. The local consultants were responsible for conducting interviews (mostly virtually but some in person, as appropriate) and supplying notes or recordings to the core team member, who reviewed and provided feedback. The core team member, in some cases, participated in interviews and conducted interviews on her own. The local consultants also collaborated with the core team member on refining lines of inquiry, selecting participants, and helping with data analysis.

The study comprised three phases: (1) inception, (2) document collection and review, and (3) four "waves" of primary data collection through key informant interviews. After each wave, lines of inquiry were refined as needed.

As part of the inception phase, five countries were selected in a manner that considered Mission-level capacity to support and benefit from the study and various features of the contexts. USAID provided an initial set of 14 potential countries; from these, the research team aimed to select five. These five countries would allow for comparison across contexts to draw out themes, but would also provide enough breadth to show diversity in contextual approaches to RtL. A scoring rubric was prepared to assist in this selection process. The rubric was designed so that each country would be coded on two administrative criteria (USAID Mission concurrence and existing vetted GK Consulting contacts) and five situational criteria. For each country, a "contextual profile" was thus generated, which balanced the uniqueness of a context with its complementarity within the set. These five situational criteria were:

1. Resilience: experience with a health crisis, or a crisis in which schools closed at scale for a protracted period of time
2. Return to learning status: schools have reopened/are currently open/funding allocated or provided

[7] In the Nigeria case study, an additional local consultant was brought on to support outreach to and interviews with the state-level government agencies.

3. Context vulnerability: nature of existing shocks and stressors on society, and specifically on learners
4. Diversity of income levels
5. Geographical diversity (aim to include one each from Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa)[8]

Colombia was selected because of its upper-middle income status, as well as experience dealing with natural hazards and an ongoing refugee situation. Georgia served as a good contrast to Colombia given that it, too, had an upper middle-income status but had fewer ongoing shocks. Nigeria was selected because of its lower-middle income status and previous experience battling a public health crisis (Ebola in 2015) along with recurring instances of violence in the north. Lebanon and Nigeria, complemented each other in terms of their similarly multi-risk contexts and lower-middle income status, but were distinct from one another in terms of geography and geopolitics.

Also during the inception phase, the research questions initially articulated by USAID were elaborated on and situated within a conceptual framework (Appendix D), and local consultants were hired to lead the primary research for case studies in each of the selected locations.

For the second phase, the research team conducted a comprehensive desk review and gathered (a) frameworks published by international agencies on education sector responses to COVID-19; (b) reports on education during the pandemic school closures; (c) situation analyses of access to education during school closure in each of the study countries; and (d) government plans drafted and decreed in response to COVID-19 (specifically in the education sector) for each of the countries. At this point, additional areas (geographical or thematic) of focus were considered for certain contexts. For example, it was determined that northern states would be explored to understand RtL in a multi-hazard context in Nigeria; non-formal education would be explored to understand the dynamics of that portion of the education sector in Lebanon; and the situation of Venezuelan migrants would be explored to understand issues of inclusion and equity in Colombia.

The third phase focused on interviews with key informants in the education sector—from government agencies, donor agencies, universities, NGOs, civil society organizations, and the private sector—over a series of four waves of research. After each wave, the local and international research teams convened to discuss emerging findings and recalibrate the research questions and sample set for subsequent waves. In total, 234 interviews were conducted across the five case study locations (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2. Respondents interviewed during phase 3

	COLOMBIA	GEORGIA	LEBANON	NIGERIA	ZAMBIA	TOTAL
Government officials	14	22	14	8	6	64
Donors	2	3	9	5	4	23

[8] A separate set of case studies had already been planned through the USAID Asia Bureau, so Asian countries were not considered in the set commissioned by USAID's Center for Education.

	COLOMBIA	GEORGIA	LEBANON	NIGERIA	ZAMBIA	TOTAL
United Nations or World Bank	1	2				3
International and local NGOs	7	8	9	7	13	46
Civil society	12	8		5	5	22
Private sector education actors	5	0		3		8
Principals, teachers		14	38			52
TOTAL	**43**	**57**	**70**	**27**	**37**	**234**

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations must be considered in contextualizing the findings of this study:

Limited or difficult-to-obtain government-level documentation on RtL process

When describing the plans for RtL, documentation from each of the case study locations was particularly helpful in providing the foundational information sought for the descriptive components of this study. Importantly, documents were also used as the basis for subsequent interviews where informants were asked to reflect on the content. However, in some cases, such documentation either did not exist or was extremely difficult to obtain in a timely manner. This was particularly true in more decentralized contexts. In Nigeria, for example, while a national policy for return to learning was made widely available, the state-level policies were not so easily obtained. In some cases, it remained unclear whether written documentation existed beyond policy documents prepared in collaboration with, for example, the Education in Emergencies Working Group (EIEWG) in the region. In Colombia, national guidelines were available but all written plans were made at the school and *Secretaría* level, which required establishing contacts with individuals at those levels to learn about the specifics of the plans. In contrast, in both Zambia and Georgia, a national strategy was widely available and applied across regions and was, therefore, able to be reflected on as written.

Challenge accessing information from key informants

While the multi-wave methodology allowed for a substantial amount of time to reach out to key informants and to build relationships with individuals and organizations/agencies over the course of the research, there were limitations in the team's ability to access some individuals, in particular at the government level. This was true both in terms of securing an interview at all and in hearing candid responses from that individual. As a result, in some cases, the government perspective was provided by just a few individuals who offered a particular perspective on successes or challenges; in some cases, these perspectives were in contrast to more critical descriptions offered by other respondents. Limited access to state government was particularly problematic in the Nigeria case study, where northern

state-level government actors required multiple requests for interviews to secure one individual; this individual then offered a perspective meant to be representative of the Ministry of Education as a whole.

Subjectivity and potential for bias from research team

As with respondents, researchers themselves were subject to their own biases that emerged in the data, particularly with the open-ended qualitative approach employed for this study. The local researchers had significant influence and autonomy over shaping the questions that were asked in each interview, and in analyzing and interpreting responses. This helped ensure that the questions were relevant and appropriate to the context at the time in terms of COVID-19 and other developments in the education sector in each setting. Constant reflexivity within the research team and a process of triangulating information (where possible) served to mitigate some of the inherent biases that individual researchers brought to their work. Specifically, local consultants regularly engaged with the core team and each other to share findings and analysis. Local consultants were also asked to directly reflect on some of their own biases emerging from the research.

More limited geographic focus for some case studies

While the case studies explore the ways in which national governments and education ministries responded to COVID-19, it was necessary to focus on individual regions within some countries, particularly in the more decentralized countries (Colombia, Nigeria) and countries in which there were vast differences in contextual factors (Nigeria). For instance, in Nigeria, the case study focuses on the northern regions and individual states within those regions, where access to key informants was feasible. The Colombia case study focuses on individual *Secretarías* to provide examples of the range of approaches to RtL, contextual factors within those locations (e.g., locations affected by natural hazards or hosting large numbers of Venezuelan migrants) and were selected based on ability to access key informants in those areas. Despite this, all case studies are considered within the context of the national plans and processes for return to learning such that one may speak of a "country's" RtL process. The limitation is simply that the examples and evidence presented in these case studies may be limited to specific geographical regions. This is noted throughout the report.

Timebound focus on first fourteen months of COVID-19

This study was conducted during the six months from November 2020 to April 2021 and was designed to reflect both on the initial eight months of crisis response and on the ongoing response, decision-making processes, and actions that took place during the course of the six months of data collection. It was beyond the scope of this study to capture longer-term outcomes of the RtL process. As such, some of the research questions could only be partially addressed, and in some cases, have introduced more questions to ask in subsequent research. For example, our research found that the majority of coping strategies deployed across the contexts were absorptive in nature, more so than adaptive or transformative, given that the COVID-19 emergency was ongoing. The research focus was therefore balanced toward absorptive capacities deployed and the characteristics that allowed some contexts to more readily build on these to then deploy adaptive strategies, and in less depth on transformative capacities. The potential for both adaptive and transformative capacities to be further leveraged in the future has been explored in the "pockets of promise" and serves as an important focal point for future research.

3. PATHWAYS OF RESPONSE TO COVID-19

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIVE CASE STUDY CONTEXTS

This collection of five case studies presented an opportunity to consider how similar responses to the COVID-19 pandemic across the contexts were shaped by the unique features, capacities, structures, and existing stressors of each location. Key contextual features of each location are summarized in Exhibit 3 below and subsequently elaborated upon.[9]

Exhibit 3. Summary of key contextual features across case studies

	COLOMBIA	GEORGIA	LEBANON	NIGERIA	ZAMBIA
Contextual factors					
Climate variability, ongoing natural disaster	✓			✓	✓
Social crisis, violence, protest, etc.	✓		✓	✓	
Economic crisis, inflation			✓	✓	✓
Food insecurity				✓	✓
Protracted conflict, related instability, refugees/displacement, migrant population	✓		✓	✓	✓
Widespread poverty, unemployment			✓	✓	✓
Previous experience with pandemic				✓[10]	✓[11]
Centralization	Decentral	Central	Central	Decentral	Partial
Previous experience with school closure			✓	✓	
Existing distance learning mechanisms pre-COVID-19	No	Some	No	Some in North	No
Key Indicators					
Economic classification (2019)	Upper middle	Upper middle	Upper middle	Lower middle	Lower middle

[9] See individual country case studies for more in-depth elaboration on context-specific responses and RtL processes.
[10] Ebola in 2014; HIV/AIDS
[11] HIV/AIDS

	COLOMBIA	GEORGIA	LEBANON	NIGERIA	ZAMBIA
GDP per capita (USD, 2019)	6,428.7	4,698.0	7,583.7	2,229.9	1,305.1
GINI Index	51.3	35.9	31.8	35.1	57.1
Net primary school enrollment (%)	98	99	98	66	87.9
Progression to secondary school, female/male (%)	95/98	100/100	97/95	61/60	62/66

Colombia

Before COVID-19, Colombia struggled with different types of social, political, economic, and environmental challenges. The country had seen more than 60 years of internal armed conflict that had left more than 7 million internally displaced people, and despite 2016's peace agreement, smaller conflicts endured. Economically, Colombia in 2020 was one of the most unequal countries in Latin America, with 17.5 percent of its population in multidimensional poverty.[12] While 65 percent of Colombians use the Internet, only 17.6 percent of the people from the lowest socioeconomic status have an Internet connection. Environmentally, Colombia continues to struggle with high exposure to natural hazards such as earthquakes, floods, and landslides. Colombia also faces a migration crisis as a result of economic, political, and civil instability in neighboring Venezuela. Of the more than 5.2 million Venezuelans who left their country since 2015, the International Rescue Committee estimated that by 2020, 1.7 million were living in Colombia, 460,000 of whom were school-aged children. In February 2021, the national government announced temporary protective status for Venezuelan migrants, an important first step in helping integrate Venezuelans into Colombia. However, it was not until May 5, 2021 that migrants were able to sign up to access the benefits of this status.

Colombia has a highly decentralized education system in terms of management and administration, but is centralized in terms of the public budget expenditure. Education has been considered a national priority, with government allocation for education in 2016 higher than any other sector (USAID 2020).[13] The National Law on Education (115 of 1994) prescribes no national curriculum and schools operate under an "autonomy principle," with some general mandates. The flexible academic calendar can be adapted to the regional economic conditions or schools' traditions, and each *Secretaría* has its own calendar with specific dates approved by the Ministry of Education.

[12] The Multidimensional poverty index (MPI) encompasses acute depravations in health, living standards, and education to complement monetary poverty measures (Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative 2021).
[13] "In 2016, the public investment in education represented 9.8 percent of the total government expenditures, of which 7.4 percentage points were allocated to preschool, basic, and secondary school, and the remaining 2.4 points to higher education. In 2020, the public investment in the education sector was established at nearly $12 billion, which is the highest value invested in education from public resources in the history of the country."

Georgia

Over the last 25 years, Georgia has made steady economic, social, and political progress through the introduction of policies that support the poorest people and regions of the country. In 2015, Georgia moved from lower-middle to upper-middle income classification, and prior to COVID-19, levels of extreme poverty in the country had been reduced to eight percent (World Bank 2018). Georgia has a well-functioning social protection system with 67 percent of households receiving at least one form of state assistance administered by the central government (e.g., old-age pension or targeted social assistance) (UNICEF 2018). The country is a representative parliamentary democracy; despite recent reforms to build the capacity of localized, district authorities, it functions as a largely centralized state (UNICEF 2020). In recent decades, Georgia has undertaken significant anti-corruption measures and, in 2020, was classified as low-risk according to the global Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International 2020). According to UNICEF, Georgia is considered a medium disaster risk country, with risk for flood, earthquake, and civil unrest/ethnic conflict (UNICEF 2020).

The Georgian education system consists of early childhood education (ECE), general education (GE), vocational education and training (VET), and higher education (HE). Early education, overseen by local municipalities, enrolls children between ages 2 and 6 and is offered free by public ECE centers or authorized private institutions (Parliament of Georgia 2016). General education falls under the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MoES) and follows a national curriculum developed by the MoES. The National Teacher Professional Development Center is the centralized agency responsible for providing teacher professional development. Education resource centers at the local level act as intermediaries between the MoES and schools. Higher education institutions are autonomous from the state and regularly authorized by the National Education Quality Enhancement Center.

Despite high participation rates in general education, student learning outcomes remain low. International and national assessments show that a large share of Georgian students fall behind in developing their reading, mathematics, and science competencies in early years of their schooling: 14 percent of the fourth graders in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study reading comprehension assessment, 22 percent of the students in online reading comprehension, 22 percent in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) mathematics assessment, and 26 percent in the TIMSS science assessment perform below "low achievement" level. By the end of compulsory schooling, around half of Georgian students fail to demonstrate basic competencies in reading, mathematics, and sciences. Students in ethnic minority language schools, students in remote rural areas, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have traditionally performed significantly lower compared to their peers with more privileged backgrounds. For example, according to the latest PISA assessment, the difference in the mean performance reading score between urban and rural schools is 45 points and the difference between the schools by the language of instruction (Georgian and non-Georgian) is 69 points, on average (NAEC 2020).

Lebanon

At the onset of COVID-19, Lebanon was suffering a complex number, variety, and depth of shocks and stressors, many connected to the effects of the 1975–1990 civil war. Immediately prior to the pandemic, Lebanon's unemployment rate had jumped to 25 percent, and nearly a third of the population was living below the poverty line. Lebanon in

2021 has the highest ratio of refugees per capita in the world and hosts, among others, approximately 1.5 million people from the ongoing war in Syria that erupted in 2011 (UNHCR 2020a). Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perception Index ranked Lebanon at 149 out of 180 countries (Transparency International 2020) and, from October to December 2019, street protests ignited across Lebanon in response to ongoing endemic corruption and a deteriorating economy. Then-Prime Minister Hariri resigned less than two months afterwards, and the country continued operating under a shadow government. At the same time, confidence in the banking sector began to plummet and the economic crash began. Depreciation of the Lebanese Pound resulted in staggering inflation of 84 percent in 2020 (Houssari 2020), and food inflation stood at 402 percent. Many public services in Lebanon, including electricity and Internet, are failing (France24 2021) and, on August 4, 2020, a catastrophic explosion at the Beirut Port left over 200 people dead, 300,000 homeless, 6,500 injured, and 163 schools with varying degrees of damage (UNESCO 2020).

The education system in Lebanon is highly centralized, and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) regulates all education provisions from kindergarten to higher education, across public, private, and non-formal education (NFE).[14] Less than half of all public school teachers are tenured, while the majority are on some form of temporary contract that pays by the hour. The public education system also serves approximately 150,000 of the estimated 660,000 Syrian refugee children in Lebanon through a second shift in 360 public schools (CRDP 2020). NFE is also a critical provision in Lebanon, particularly for children who are marginalized because of their refugee status, low income level, or poverty, and are out of school. The MEHE regulates NFE programs, which support approximately 30,000 learners, mostly Syrian refugees (Inter-agency Coordination Lebanon 2020).

Nigeria

At the onset of COVID-19, Nigeria was already facing a complex emergency of ongoing violence and climate risks/natural hazards. The Nigeria study focuses on the northeast Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states in which, prior to 2020, violence had already been occurring for twelve years, with more than 180,000 people forced to flee their homes because of attacks by criminal groups, many linked to terrorist organizations, rendering access to livelihoods difficult for many more. Since the start of conflict in 2009, more than 36,000 people have been killed in these states, almost half of them civilians (OCHA 2020) and, since October 2020, a proliferation of attacks from non-state armed groups (primarily, Boko Haram and a splinter faction, Islamic State West Africa Province) and government counter-operations have affected civilians.[15] In Borno State—where 81 percent of Nigeria's displaced population and 54 percent of those in camps reside—four of five are women or children. Much of northern Nigeria is also prone to natural hazards,[16] and it has been difficult for the state to

[14] The years 2019 and 2020 have seen a population of children in the private sector migrating over to public schools in response to the economic collapse as well as ongoing school closures due to ongoing nationwide protests. With compounding effects of COVID-19 in 2020, the MEHE expected an estimated increase of 10 to 20 percent enrollment in the 2020/21 academic year compared to former school years, with up to 1,600 private schools reportedly at threat of closing down due to economic strife.

[15] Insecurity in these areas is increasing in the form of attacks on and kidnapping of civilians by criminal groups, for example the December abduction of 300+ schoolboys from school in Kankara. In February, 2021, 279 girls abducted were abducted from their secondary school in north-central Zamfara. Soon after, 27 schoolboys in central Niger state were abducted, leading to the closure of boarding schools in Kano, Yobe, Niger, and Zamfara.

[16] For example, flash flooding from heavy downpour October 5–11 hit several communities in Bade and Jakuso LGAs of Yobe State with some 5,000 people, mostly farming households, directly affected.

respond to serious climate risks (USAID 2018). Despite its under-resourced health delivery system, Nigeria responded to the 2014 Ebola epidemic with rapid, protective measures under the guidance of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control. Based on research from past pandemics (including HIV/AIDS and Ebola), Mercy Corps predicted increased violence in the north resulting from the intersection of COVID-19 and these previously existing contextual risks (Mercy Corps 2020).

The decentralized education system in Nigeria operates nationally through the Federal Ministry of Education and parastatal Universal Basic Education Commission, and at the state level through the States Ministries of Education, parastatal State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs), and State Agency for Mass Education.[17] Across the states are 774 Local Government Areas with education operations through the Local Government Education Authorities. Primary education is free and compulsory, yet only 61 percent of 6 to11 year old children regularly attend primary school, with even fewer in the north attending regularly (53 percent). Girls are particularly marginalized, with 47.7 percent of girls in the northeast and 47.3 percent of girls in the northwest attending regularly. In the northeast, 2.8 million children reside in conflict-affected states and, with 802 schools closed, 497 classrooms classified as "destroyed," and 1,392 classrooms classified as "damaged but reparable," 13.2 million children are out of school.[18] Schools provide the federally funded school feeding programs which support health, nutrition, and enrollment in schools and serve as a social safety net.

Zambia

The Zambian government's response to the pandemic occurred alongside significant economic impact and challenges, many of which pre-dated COVID-19. These issues—high debt, fiscal deficit, declining copper prices, drought and flooding impacts on the agricultural sector and food security, and a high poverty rate—have since been exacerbated by the pandemic, and Zambia became the first African country to default on its debt in the COVID-19 era in November 2020. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Zambia was suffering increasing macroeconomic vulnerability.[19] Since the start of the pandemic, the real output growth has declined by 4.5 percent, the Zambian economy's first negative growth since 1998 (UNCTAD 2021). During 2020, the poverty rate increased from 58.6 to 60.5 percent (World Bank 2020). Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics differ significantly across its ten provinces, with particular disparity between the Lusaka and Copperbelt provinces (and their large urban areas) and the more rural provinces. The agriculture sector in these provinces is vulnerable to climate-related risks, and food security in these provinces is a concern. An already highly socioeconomically inequitable country has only seen this inequity increase during 2020. Increased debt spending in the last five years has led to declining budget

[17] SUBEB is the agency in each state that is responsible for the first nine years of schooling or basic education (Primary 1 to Junior Secondary School three.) SAME is responsible for adult and vocational learning.
[18] In the north-east, 29 percent of all children receive Qur'anic (also known as *Tsangaya* or *Almajiri*) education, as do 35 percent of children in the northwest; this education typically does not include basic skills such as literacy and numeracy and the government considers children attending such schools to be officially out-of-school. In these locations, children mainly learn to recite Qur'an. Many children (Almajiri) leave home to live under the Ma'alam or spiritual leader (UNICEF 2021 and Creative Associates, 2015).
[19] The early 2000s saw notable growth in Zambia's economy (an average growth rate of 5.6 percent from 2000-2010); this peaked at 10.3 percent in 2010, leading to the country's reclassification from low to lower-middle income. By 2019, this growth had substantially slowed (to an average of real output growth of 3.3 percent between 2014-2019) as a result of lowered global copper prices and climate-related agricultural loss.

allocations to most sectors, including education and health (ZANEC 2019 and Zambia Ministry of Finance 2021).[20]

The Zambian education system consists of early childhood education (ECE), primary, secondary, and tertiary or professional levels. The Zambian Ministry of General Education (MoGE) recognizes two alternative approaches to formal primary schooling: community schools and distance learning via interactive radio centers (provided by the Education Broadcasting Services). These non-formal options target marginalized learners such as those who have missed out on extended portions of schooling (Zambia Ministry of Finance 2021), refugees or displaced children, and geographically isolated children (UNHCR 2020).[21] By the beginning of 2020, Zambia had achieved near universal primary school completion (national completion rates of approximately 92 percent), but transition rates to secondary school remained relatively low (approximately 68 percent). Girls record higher levels of dropout in both upper primary and secondary levels, as well as lower transition rates (UNICEF 2015).[22] Efforts to address equity and inclusion in education have featured centrally in Zambia's national education strategy.[23] The MoGE tracks equity indicators, which include: gender parity index, out-of-school children ages 7–13; orphans; children with special educational needs; pregnancies; and re-admissions. At the start of 2020, key challenges for the education sector were: (a) not enough schools, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels; (b) issues of quality, such as low completion rates, low pupil-book ratio, and low contact hours; and (c) difficult contextual factors for the MoGE, including high turnover rates and financing and accountability challenges (GPE Zambia 2021 and Zambia Ministry of Finance 2021).

COVID-19 CLOSURE TIMELINES

Exhibit 4 provides a snapshot of school closures in each of the case study locations; the findings section will then review the RtL response chronologically.

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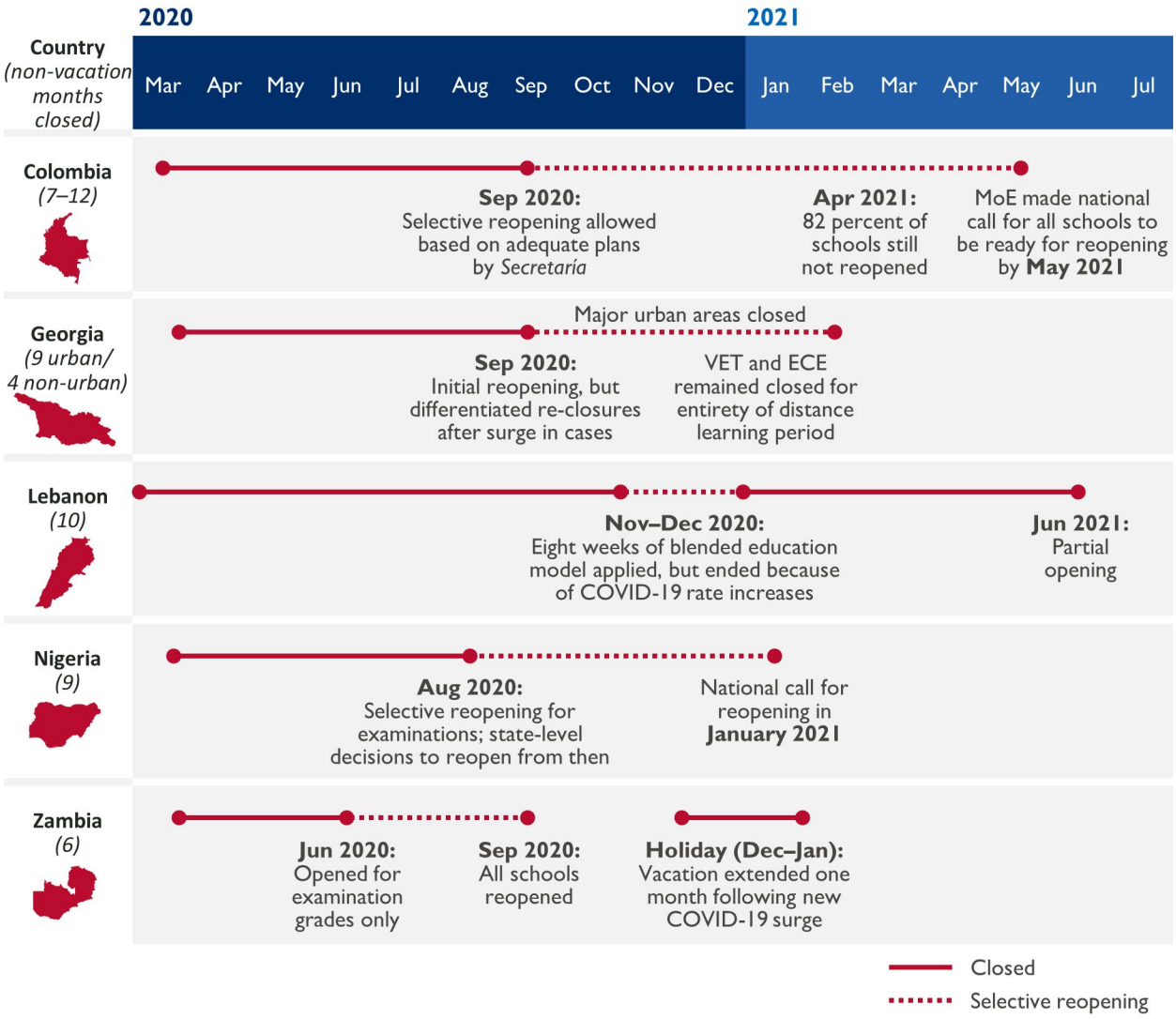
[20] Since 2015, the education budget has been reduced from 20.2 percent (2015) to 12.4 percent (2020), a 39 percent reduction over four years. In September, it was announced that the 2021 allocation to the education sector will be 11.5 percent of overall government expenditure.

[21] As of 2020, there were approximately 90,000 refugees, asylum seekers, and former refugees living in three refugee settlement and urban areas in Zambia. Refugees have limited access to education, as well as health and other basic services, though they are technically included in national, formal school planning.

[22] A UNICEF study found that a main barrier to girls' secondary education was secondary education school fees, which are unaffordable to households living in extreme poverty. Relatedly, Zambia records some of the highest rates of both child marriage (29 percent) and teenage pregnancy globally (32 percent of girls age 15-19 were pregnant or already had given birth in 2018).

[23] In the 1990s, this included outreach to learners living in extreme poverty via the Poverty Reduction Strategy, then the Programme to Advance Girls' Education. Following, there was legislation on behalf of children orphaned during the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as well as for children with special educational needs (https://www.globalpartnership.org/where-we-work/zambia.) The country instituted a School Re-entry Policy to allow girls to return to school after giving birth in 1997; a 2015 assessment of the policy's impact noted that, while educational attainment has increased for adolescent mothers since its implementation, this rate of increase is still lower than for girls overall (Serpell 2011 and Mwanawasa 2020).

Exhibit 4. Timeline of school closures, reopening, total months closed (public primary and secondary schools)



INITIAL EDUCATION RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

While reviewing the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic described throughout this report, it is important to bear in mind that global understanding of the COVID-19 virus, including both its transmissibility and its impacts, emerged over the course of the year of research. In particular, at the outset of the pandemic, little was known about the degree to which transmission within schools and by children would occur; there was, therefore, much initial emphasis on handwashing and other sanitation procedures, and, subsequently, masking, ventilation, and physical distancing. By mid-2020, there was a growing global realization that the shock of COVID-19 was not abating as quickly as initially expected, and responses shifted again. It is within this dynamic context that the responses described in this section took place. Across all five case study locations, initial response efforts worked toward the following common objectives:

1. Minimizing exposure and impact of the virus

2. Planning approaches and processes for the continuity of learning during school closures
3. Ensuring the safety of learners, teachers, and communities for the return to in-person learning
4. Transitioning back to in-person learning

The responses in the five case study locations are described below. This includes discussion of initial response efforts intended to be short-term in nature, but which ultimately evolved into longer-term efforts that required planning beyond the initial response. The report then spotlights responses that not only absorbed the impact of COVID-19 but also sought to adapt to it by identifying relevant existing capacities—for example, existing policies, networks, and structures—to build on for longer-term response.

Minimize exposure and minimize impact

1. SCHOOL CLOSURE

Schools were closed within the first weeks of COVID-19 identification in each country in order to contain the virus. This measure protected the health and safety of teachers, learners, and communities by minimizing exposure to COVID-19.

While early responses were shaped by public health considerations (minimizing exposure to COVID-19), it quickly became clear that closures would need to last weeks or months. During this time, there was recognition of the need to first provide some continuity of learning (short-term, stop gap responses focused on distance learning) and then to identify when/how/under what circumstances children could return to in-person school.

2. NATIONAL COALITION MOBILIZATION

Inter-agency and cross-sectoral coalitions were established in the first weeks of response to plan for and respond to COVID-19 in the education sector.

In all locations, national inter-ministerial coalitions were formed to direct the broader national response. At a sectoral level, government-led inter-agency coalitions were rapidly mobilized to plan for and respond to COVID-19 in the education sector. These coalitions consisted of cross-sectoral actors, from education and health, and sometimes protection agencies, of government and development partners, including United Nations agencies, civil society, international and local NGOs, and donors. In some cases, the coalition of partners already existed—for example, the Education Working Group in Zambia and the EIEWG in northeast Nigeria—and were deployed for the COVID-19 response. In Colombia, a coalition was formed for the purpose of COVID-19 response that included the Ministry of Health and others. Coalitions involved in the initial COVID-19 response are summarized in Exhibit 5.

Exhibit 5. Summary of coalitions mobilized for the COVID-19 response and their initial actions

COUNTRY	COALITIONS MOBILIZED AND INITIAL ACTIONS (MARCH–EARLY MAY 2020)
Colombia	The Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare) and the Presidential Council for Children, *Secretarías* and mayors, and other local-level education stakeholders

COUNTRY	COALITIONS MOBILIZED AND INITIAL ACTIONS (MARCH–EARLY MAY 2020)
	were consulted in producing national guidelines to restart in-person learning beginning soon after the closures were announced (March 2020).
Georgia	At the national level, there was cooperation between health and education ministries in collaboration with donors, international and local NGOs, and civil society. Education Resource Centers—the sub-national state education actors—collaborated closely with central government and schools, and were empowered to make decisions at district and school levels.
Lebanon	At the national level, in March 2020, the national Inter-Ministerial Committee for COVID-19 was mobilized to guide the national COVID-19 response. This body made national cross-sector response decisions about, for example, school closings/opening (and about adjusting the examination schedules later in the response). At a sectoral level, in March 2020, the MEHE formed a coalition of education officials from the MEHE, the Center for Educational Research and Development, and key education donors. This coalition initially consulted on various education-related decisions, especially on funding education responses. At the sub-sectoral level, in March 2020, the education sector's Inter-Agency for Coordination group, comprised of United Nations agencies, international implementing partners, and civil society groups, mobilized to conduct needs assessments and, by April 2020, had drafted an NFE COVID-19 response plan.
Nigeria	The Federal Ministry of Education with UNICEF and other development partners obtained an initial (late March) GPE grant of $140,000 for planning, then $15 million for COVID-19 response (applied May 11, 2020). In the northeast, the EIEWG, a 50-member partner organization led by (parastatal) State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), Save the Children, and UNICEF, mobilized to prepare response alongside existing work being done on humanitarian response plans.
Zambia	At the national level, the already-established Technical Working Group comprised of the Ministry of General Education and partners including civil society, donors, international and local NGOs, and United Nations agencies collaborated on drafting the national COVID-19 Education Contingency Plan (April 2020). With swift production of this plan, Zambia applied for assistance to GPE via its accelerated funding mechanisms and was one of the first ten countries to receive direct assistance ($10 million) for pandemic aid. Shortly after, the Zambia National Education Coalition (ZANEC), a network of more than 75 civil society organizations, implemented a GPE-funded national assessment that relied on collaboration with its member groups across the country.

The cross-sectoral and/or inter-agency nature of coalitions mobilized so early in the COVID-19 response indicated the rapid recognition of government agencies that response efforts needed to draw on resources and decision makers across a range of sectors. For education response, this included health and often the child protection sectors. Formation and mobilization of these coalitions offered examples of how countries identified and leveraged capacities across systems (for example, health and education), and/or at different levels of the system (for example, national and sub-national levels), and/or across different institutions within the system (for example, funding partners and technical partners) in the initial stages to compound resources for the response.

Nigeria and Zambia's swift application and receipt of GPE funding for COVID-19 response and the NFE sector in Lebanon's rapid assessment to inform a comprehensive COVID-19 response plan were particularly notable in the initial trajectories of these coalitions.

3. INITIAL DISTANCE LEARNING RESPONSES

In seeking to minimize the impact of disrupted learning during school closures, various modalities of distance learning measures were initially deployed (relatively) swiftly across the five locations.

Distance learning measures included support for learning either at home or in localized community spaces via radio, television, and online platforms. Across all locations, the initial distance learning solutions—rolled out within a month of the initial closures and with a short duration in mind—were further refined as it became clear that the closures would last longer than anticipated. Differences across the contexts can largely be understood by: (a) if/how countries were able to leverage existing distance education-related assets in the initial period and (b) the degree to which government approaches to distance learning were or were not modified to engage more marginalized learners who struggled to access distance education modalities (and, in the absence of adequate government response, the degree to which other actors moved into this space).

Exhibit 6 summarizes the distance education modalities that were utilized by each country in the immediate term (March to April 2020), highlighting where existing assets were leveraged to lead that response. Of particular note in the table is the heavy initial reliance across contexts on models which require technology - both low-tech (radio and television) and high-tech models (online). No-tech models - for example, deployment of paper-based materials - were notably not always prioritized in initial distance learning responses, most likely influenced by lockdown measures in place across contexts in the initial weeks/months of response.

Exhibit 6. Government-implemented distance education modalities in initial period following closures (March–April 2020)

COUNTRY	MODALITY (MARCH–APRIL 2020) AND CONTENT		EXISTING ASSETS LEVERAGED IN RESPONSE
Colombia	Radio and Television	Pre-primary: none General education: used existing learning programs; TV for primary to middle school	Strong history of radio and television educational programming for general education
	Online	Pre-primary and general education: created new online learning portal for distance education (classes) organized by grade from pre-primary to middle school Higher education: most universities shifted to Moodle and Microsoft Teams	
Georgia	Television	General education: existing learning programs	Online platforms already in use so scale-up was efficient; television

COUNTRY	MODALITY (MARCH–APRIL 2020) AND CONTENT		EXISTING ASSETS LEVERAGED IN RESPONSE
	Online	General education: existing learning programs	education in place and was quickly utilized
Lebanon	Television	General education: new television classes and YouTube health campaigns	Leveraged existing government television channel and MEHE portal
	Online	General education: new online platform using existing curriculum and content	Online platform was already under construction prior to COVID-19; modification of content for the platform was expedited in early weeks of response for first-time deployment
Nigeria	Radio and Television	General education: existing radio and TV learning programs for primary to middle school	Radio education used commonly in many parts of north
	Online	General education: constantly updated open access content made up of existing resources (available through the private ed-tech sector), organized by grade Higher education: private universities and some public universities had existing online learning mechanisms in place	Some private universities had existing infrastructure in place for over ten years and adjusted quickly; others had to build online systems from scratch but leveraged students' existing usage of WhatsApp (Okocha 2021)
Zambia	Radio and Television	Pre-primary and general education: existing learning programs used and adapted for COVID-19	Radio education previously used as alternative modality to reach marginalized learners; other distance learning in use primarily for higher education
	Online	General education: existing learning programs used initially (later updated) Higher education: existing learning programs used and extended	

Nigeria and Zambia immediately deployed the use of radio as a key distance learning measure. In Nigeria, this was especially critical for the many students unable to access online content. Teaching by radio had been in use in locations in northern Nigeria since at least 2017 to support learning for children geographically marginalized or marginalized by instability or displacement.[24] It was quickly rolled out in response to COVID-19 in some of the areas already served by international NGOs working with local governments. In Zambia, radio instruction was in place via the Alternative Modalities of Education Programming to reach out-of-school children, governed by the Department of Distance Education. Radio was the priority response at the onset of COVID-19 in Zambia, with the national COVID-19 response plan focusing on the development and repackaging of learning material for it.

[24] The USAID-funded NEI+ activity utilized this approach in Bauchi and Sokoto.

All countries also immediately deployed television as a means to deliver class content and health information campaigns to learners. For example, Georgia's Teleskola television program was deployed on March 30, 2020 through a partnership between the National Broadcasting Company of Georgia and the MoES. It included television lessons to cover the entire curriculum for all grades (1–12) and all subjects, and aimed to reach learners, mostly in remote areas, who did not have access to Internet or devices for online learning. This response leveraged the existence of education-based television, which allowed the MoES to scale efficiently.

In Lebanon, use of Tele-Liban, the national television station, was rolled out in April 2020 with the support of technical implementation partners as both a distance learning measure and to convey health campaigns for learners. The lessons are accessible on YouTube at the "Tele-Liban E-learning" channel. The programs targeted only the learners who had impending official exams—grades 9 and 12—with the intention of expanding to other grades some time afterwards. However, this early use of television/YouTube as a distance learning measure was largely superseded once the online learning platform, which reached the entire learner population, became available in April 2020.

All countries also offered some level of online response available within March–April 2020, although there were differences between the resources leveraged to deploy online responses in the immediate term. For example, in Nigeria, initial online resources were limited to open access online portals established at the ministry level; these included thousands of resources organized by grade level. A more developed Home Learning Programme was being planned by April 2020 but was not rolled out until July 2020.

In Georgia and Lebanon, the ministries of education had online teaching and learning platforms in place as their main distance learning measures by April 2020. In both cases, virtual classrooms were established for each class using Microsoft Teams. The virtual classrooms offered an online portal for teachers and learners to connect in real time and draw on available content during classes and home study. In Georgia, a survey conducted in June 2020 showed that 73 percent of students engaged in online distance learning in April and 90 percent in May.[25]

4. MODIFYING DISTANCE EDUCATION; REACHING MARGINALIZED LEARNERS

As it became clear that distance education was going to be necessary for longer than was initially anticipated—alongside identification of key challenges to engaging learners in quality distance education—these distance modalities were further developed, including to try to better engage marginalized learners who may not access such modalities. Despite existing technical, governance, and programmatic capacities in each location to deploy and maintain radio teaching and learning mechanisms, limitations within the broader context meant that benefits of this mechanism remained localized across locations. Radio coverage in both Nigeria and Zambia was limited, with only 71 percent of urban households and 52 percent of rural households in Nigeria, and only 40 percent of urban households and 34 percent of rural households in Zambia owning a radio. Additionally, learners who were able to access the radio programming were reported to need additional instructional support. Such challenges clearly limited the broader potential of this mechanism. To respond, in northeast Nigeria, the state education boards in Adamawa, Sokoto, and Borno states (with

[25] Survey conducted by the National Assessment and Examination Center (NAEC) in Georgia.

international NGO support) established community-based learning centers where learners could gather around a radio to listen to the programming as it aired. Supplemental instruction was provided by paid facilitators. To try to attract learners to the centers, facilitators also offered activities such as popular community music or sports, but this remained localized.

In Zambia, prior to the adoption of the March 2020 Contingency Plan, a rapid assessment was conducted to understand capacity for distance learning. While efforts to use radio and TV for continuous learning were quickly mobilized, as of 2018, only 37 percent of households across the country had a working TV and approximately 40 percent owned a working radio. For rural areas, these numbers were distinctly less at 15.5 percent (TV) and 34 percent (radio). Only 8.1 percent of households in the country owned a computer (2.7 percent in rural areas) (MoGE 2020a). These statistics are explicitly provided in the MoGE Contingency Plan, indicating awareness of the challenges posed by distance learning modalities. Such assessment led to clear recommendations by civil society and international and local NGOs to reopen in-person learning as soon as it was determined safe to do so.

Teachers and learners across all contexts encountered challenges with using government-provided online platforms, not only with teacher and learner capacity to engage with the functionalities of the platform, but also with connectivity and access to devices,[26] which saw many of them swiftly move to other online and offline methods more readily deployable for distance teaching and learning. In Georgia, upon receiving community feedback on limited access to Microsoft Teams (originally promoted by the MoES), the Government of Georgia expanded to include other online platforms in distance education programming. In Colombia, one study found only 60 percent of urban students and 15 percent of rural students had online access. Even among those with access, as shown in a study of urban households accessing the online content, 85.6 percent of students were reported to have continued with their learning processes once schools were closed in March 2020, and of the students from primary and secondary education, only 69.1 percent did the homework their teachers assigned and 25.5 percent attended a session with their teacher (DANE 2020). With Lebanon's ongoing challenges with consistent electricity and Internet supply, teachers and learners both noted that the bandwidth required of the online platform was beyond what either they had access to, and teachers' limited ability to utilize the functionalities of the platform rendered them feeling that their teaching was not engaging for students.[27] Teachers and learners quickly started deploying their own strategies by engaging other, more familiar platforms that require less bandwidth, mainly, WhatsApp, to sustain teaching and learning at a distance.

Monitoring was conducted in Colombia by staff of certain *Secretarías* with the capacity to do so and in Zambia by the MoGE in partnership with ZANEC and international and local NGOs to assess the efficacy of distance learning programs, to what degree they were being implemented, whether or not

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[26] For example, in Colombia, "While more than 60 percent of urban school students have Internet connections to engage in distance learning strategies, only 15 percent of rural school students have the same access. Furthermore, in nearly 96 percent of the country's municipalities, fewer than half of the students have access to technological resources for virtual education programs, and the southeast region of the country appears the worst off. According to DANE, of the Colombian households with children between 5 and 18 years of age who attend school, only 18 percent of students from socio-economic strata 1, 52 percent from strata 2 and 73.9 percent from strata 3 have an Internet connection" (USAID, Colombia RERA, 2020).

[27] In Lebanon, while the online learning platform was able to be launched quickly, it faced challenges with implementation. Although, at a national level, concentrated efforts were made in building the online resources, training and ongoing support for teachers in using the online resources at a school level was reportedly limited, which was one factor among others that affected the sustainability of teacher engagement with the platforms.

learners were accessing them and the degree to which teaching and learning were taking place. The monitoring missions in both locations concluded that, although safety standards were high, distance learning practices were deemed to be weak, with limited accessibility, and with little learning taking place.[28] In these contexts, recognizing the digital divide could not be bridged in the short-term encouraged education actors to move forward with in-person learning as quickly as possible. In Georgia, on the other hand, monitoring efforts were reportedly more regular and efficient during COVID-19 in feeding data from a local level to the central government with deployment of the decentralized education resource centers.

Despite considerable investment in distance learning strategies, case study respondents consistently noted that: (a) distance learning strategies were effective in some cases in keeping learners connected to their teachers and schools, and/or to the notion of learning, but most were not effective in ensuring that substantial or widespread learning actually took place and (b) where distance learning strategies were effective in supporting learning, these have been localized and, though data is limited at the time of writing, it is likely that those benefits have not been shared by the broader population of learners.[29] Although data are still not readily available in any location to confirm rates of student dropout since the onset of COVID-19, stakeholders interviewed across all locations expected that it has increased during the period of distance learning, a trend expected globally (UNESCO 2020).

Planning strategies for the continuity of learning

1. DRAFTING NATIONAL AND REGION/STATE-LEVEL PLANS FOR THE CONTINUITY OF LEARNING

Across case study locations, plans for the return to in-person learning were drafted in the months following initial closures. The variations in prescriptiveness of the plans were in part a reflection of the structure of the education systems pre-COVID-19. Exhibit 7 provides a summary of the general content of the continuity of learning plans. There are similarities across national strategies in the amount of relative attention given to COVID-19 prevention protocols/health and safety, and variations in a number of components, including guidance around conducting assessments to inform plans, articulating appropriate models of return (e.g., revised schedules, curriculum, examinations), and monitoring implementation. Across these components, national plans employed various ways of incorporating equity and inclusion.

Plans also varied in the degree to which the documents were meant to provide prescriptive mandates for all of the education sector or provide broad guidance to be applied by autonomous regional

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[28] These findings were a strong catalyst in both cases for the call to return to in-person learning.

[29] For example, in Zambia, a GPE-funded assessment shows how little learners were actually accessing online learning. Zambia also conducted assessments led by the Zambia National Education Coalition (ZANEC) to document readiness for school opening in terms of, both, compliance with health guidelines as well as progress in effectively delivering distance learning, indicated that, although health guidelines were met by ninety-eight percent of schools, distance education—were not reaching all learners, and that for those who were accessing these options, little learning was taking place. Zambia KIIs: 1, 3 , 25, 28 . In Colombia, according to a 2020 survey on 23 capital cities where 15,000 heads of household were interviewed, on average 85,6 percent of students were reported to have continued with their learning processes (online) once schools were closed in March 2020, and of the students from primary and secondary education, 69.1 percent did the homework their teachers assigned, 67.6 percent used learning apps, 5.3 percent viewed the educational TV shows, 6.2 percent listed to the educational radio shows, and 25.5 percent attended to a session with their teachers (importantly, these data do not disaggregate by rural/urban; it is assumed the degree of engagement is much less in rural areas).

education bureaus. In Colombia's highly decentralized system, the Ministry of Education set parameters around reopening but it was up to individual *Secretarías* to come up with their own plans and protocols that were aligned with and approved by the Ministry. In Nigeria, the two-level system saw the Federal Ministry of Education set guidelines but leave it to states to craft their own specific plans. In the highly centralized system in Lebanon, there was no autonomy at the school level to decide when and how to close or reopen; all decisions in this regard, for both public and private schools, were mandated at a central level. Meanwhile, Lebanese schools had received no formal guidance as of April 2021; the initial version of the national Back to Learning plan was shared in July 2020 with sector partners to provide an insight into the government's plans for the return to learning, but without specific details about how to realize the plan at a school level.[30] In Zambia, the MoGE staggered its return to in-person learning by allowing learners in the examination grades—grades 7, 9 and 12—to return three months before all other learners. Meanwhile, the MoES in Georgia managed school closure by deploying different opening and closing responses to different sub-sectors of the education system, differentiated by context. For example, VET colleges did not offer a distance option at all during school closure. When all education institutions returned to school in September 2020, schools in eight urban locations quickly returned to distance learning because of increased COVID-19 case rates, while all other schools (rural and smaller urban) remained in person.

Exhibit 7. National strategies for returning to in-person learning

COUNTRY	AGENCIES INVOLVED	DATE RELEASED	GENERAL CONTENT
Colombia	National MoE	June 2020	Decentralized approach with national guidelines for *Secretaría* and school-level plans to be written based on assessments of context and include COVID-19 prevention protocols; plans for *alternancia educativa* (blended online and in-person).
Georgia	National MoE, MoH; Ministry of Infrastructure with support from NGOs	May 2020	COVID-19 Safety Operational Recommendations for Schools were first released at national level in May 2020 and then updated in November. Responses were decided on at the school level based on nationally-proposed options, and supported by sub-national education actors (ERCs).
Lebanon	National MEHE	July 2020	Highly centralized plan providing high level detail on key response areas including reference to health and safety protocols and a blended learning model for return to in-person learning, but limited guidelines for implementation at a school level; focus on the role of ICT in COVID-19 response; plan used in national fundraising efforts for the COVID-19 response
Nigeria	National, State, Parastatal education actors	July 2020	Decentralized approach with national guidelines for states to implement; guidance mainly around COVID-19 prevention protocols.

[30] This initial national plan was used in fundraising efforts, especially for the components requiring ICT at national, school, and student levels, which would then support its national development and rollout.

COUNTRY	AGENCIES INVOLVED	DATE RELEASED	GENERAL CONTENT
	Northeast: EIEWG	June 2020	EIEWG Response Strategy in northeast produced with three goals: a) reduce morbidity and mortality due to COVID-19 among school learners, teachers, and school stakeholder in northeast Nigeria, (2) mitigate the school closure negative impact on children learning and teacher well-being, and (3) ensure effective, inclusive, and safe return to quality learning for learners, teachers, and school-based management committees (EIEWG 2020).
Zambia	Ministry of General Education with support from Technical Education Working Group	March 2020; May 2020	Education Contingency Plan released in April 2020; Guidelines for School Reopening in May 2020; Contingency Plan comprised of response, recovery, and post-recovery periods including focus on re-engaging learners, adapting/accelerating classes, exams, and promotion, all with a focus on equity and inclusion.

Ensuring physical safety for the return to in-person learning

1. GUIDANCE AND SCHOOL-LEVEL TRAINING IN HEALTH PROTOCOLS DURING COVID-19

In seeking to ensure safety for the return to in-person learning, national guidance was produced for safe return to in-person learning, and school personnel were provided training in health protocols during COVID-19.

In preparation for a prompt return to in-person learning, which, in most cases, ultimately took many months, countries deployed measures to ensure that the eventual return to in-person learning would be safe. All countries provided some level of training to teachers and other school personnel in health, water, sanitation, and hygiene principles, and COVID-19 safety, and provided health and safety guidance and tools to schools.[31] In Zambia and Georgia, separate guidance from the initial response plans were released. In Zambia, Ministry of General Education and the Ministry of Health produced guidance; in Georgia, the MoES, in collaboration with World Vision, the Ministry of Infrastructure, and the Ministry of Health, developed guidance. In Colombia, to be considered for reopening, part of the *Secretaría's* and school's plan had to explain how they would formalize their relationship with the health sector and provide specific plans on how they would facilitate a physically safe return to learning.

[31] For examples of this in Nigeria, see https://education.gov.ng/covid-19/ . For Colombia, see https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/micrositios-institucionales/COVID-19/399094:Lineamiento-para-la-prestacion-del-servicio-de-educacion-en-casa-y-en-presencialidad-bajo-el-esquema-de-alternancia-y-la-implementacion-de-practicas-de-bioseguridad-en-la-comunidad-educativa . For Zambia see https://www.childhealthtaskforce.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/MoGE%20Guidelines%20for%20COVID-19%20FINAL-merged-merged%20%281%29.pdf . For Lebanon, see http://www.ministryinfo.gov.lb/inc/uploads/2020/09/covid-catalog-education.pdf . For Georgia, see https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=11578&lang=eng.

2. MONITORING HEALTH AND SAFETY

In preparation for the return to in-person learning, countries conducted various levels of monitoring to ensure that health protocols and safety standards were met prior to reopening. Some areas then also conducted ongoing monitoring of health protocols during in-person learning (Exhibit 8).

Exhibit 8. Monitoring efforts before and during school reopening

COUNTRY	MONITORING HEALTH PROTOCOLS IN PREPARATION OF IN-PERSON LEARNING	MONITORING HEALTH PROTOCOLS DURING IN-PERSON LEARNING
Colombia	Responsibility of *Secretarías* to inform their opening plans; conducted to varying degrees. Proof of assessment not required for approval to reopen.	Responsibility of *Secretarías* and to be written in their plans; some, not all, able to follow through. Schools not required to provide verification of monitoring.
Georgia	Guidance provided from national government but conducted at sub-national level by education resource centers and schools	Responsibility of schools and education resource centers.
Lebanon	None	Not applicable
Nigeria	National: written in guidance Responsibility of States Northeast: Leveraging EIEWG monitoring tools used by partners to assess conditions to determine suitability for reopening	None: Northeast State-level education actors report no monitoring, despite plans to do so "at regular intervals" (as reported by respondents; not documented), upon reopening, outside of international NGO-specific project monitoring not specific to reopening plans
Zambia	GPE-funded assessment of school readiness conducted in June–July by ZANEC and MoGE; schools found non-compliant were to be rechecked before reopening.	Additional and ongoing monitoring visits conducted by both government and cooperating partners to assure continued adherence to guidelines.

Consideration of marginalized groups

Countries made varying efforts to identify and accommodate marginalized groups in their reopening policies and in assessments that were done to further develop in-person learning approaches (Exhibit 9).

Exhibit 9. Efforts to identify and accommodate marginalized groups in reopening plans

COUNTRY	MANDATES/GUIDANCE TO CONSIDER MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN REOPENING POLICY DOCUMENTS	ASSESSMENTS CONDUCTED TO CONSIDER MARGINALIZED GROUPS FOR REOPENING PROCESS
Colombia	National strategy annex content related to indigenous students; students with	*Secretaría* plans included an assessment component to learn about and then

COUNTRY	MANDATES/GUIDANCE TO CONSIDER MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN REOPENING POLICY DOCUMENTS	ASSESSMENTS CONDUCTED TO CONSIDER MARGINALIZED GROUPS FOR REOPENING PROCESS
	disabilities; no mention of economically disadvantaged persons, Venezuelan migrants, or distinction of persons based on gender. Up to *Secretarías* to accommodate marginalized groups as relevant to their context; many indicated that they saw no unique challenges faced by Venezuelans.	accommodate marginalized learners; applied unevenly across *Secretarías* based on capacity limitations to conduct assessments and respond to findings.
Georgia	Specific attention to learners without access to Internet or devices	Adaptations made to assessment for students with special educational needs at national level; national survey of distance education disaggregated ethnic minority students
Lebanon	Some marginalized groups are noted in national reopening documents with some consideration of their needs (largely access to ICT and/or Internet) but no specific guidance is provided. The national NFE response plan specifically focuses on tailored response for marginalized children, including refugees and those already out of school.	At a national level, the needs assessment was limited to learner level need for access to ICT. The NFE subsector conducted a comprehensive needs assessment at the onset of COVID-19.
Nigeria	Limited: federal guidelines include attention to rural and remote areas; girl-friendly messaging Limited: northeastern states with EIEWG include explicit call for inclusion and equity in response but little elaboration beyond this	None: northeastern education actors report no monitoring, despite plans, upon reopening outside of international NGO-specific project monitoring not specific to reopening plans
Zambia	Contingency Plan has specific focus in all stages for engaging and addressing needs of marginalized learners. GPE-funded projects implemented in specific low-income contexts, many of which specifically target marginalized learners such as girls.	Integrated throughout planning processes, including ZANEC assessment prior to school reopening; also conducted by implementers in rural areas that target marginalized learners specifically

Transition back to in-person learning

1. MODELS OF RETURN: MODE OF INSTRUCTION AND SCHEDULING

Models of return in each context were largely dictated by physical distancing requirements and the need for fewer learners and teachers in schools and classrooms at one time. This resulted in most countries instituting models of return that blended in-person with distance learning and blended synchronous (live) with asynchronous (pre-recorded) instruction. This required the revision of school schedules to minimize the number of students and teachers physically in

school at a time by splitting students into two groups and alternating when students would physically be at school. Exhibit 10 summarizes the main mechanisms and challenges in implementing the chosen models for in-person learning.

Exhibit 10. Models of return for in-person learning

COUNTRY	MODEL(S)	DATE OF REOPENING	DETAILS ON IMPLEMENTATION
Colombia	Blended learning/alternating schedules	August 2020 (earliest approved schools)	Students would alternate staying home and participating in distance education to limit number of students in classroom at one time. Most schools unable to draft plan that meets minimum criteria for safe reopening (limited technical, financial, personnel capacity to meet needs of all learners in area)
Georgia	Shifted or blended learning	September 2020	Decisions made at the regional or school level to ensure relevance to context. In some locations, schools selected a.m./p.m. shifts to ensure fewer students; in other locations, there were blended online/in-person options; in still other locations, school schedules operated as per pre-COVID-19.
Lebanon	Blended learning/alternating schedules	November–December 2020 for eight weeks only	To limit number of learners in classroom at one time, learners were split into two groups, alternating one week learning at home with the next week learning in person. After only six weeks of in-person learning, schools closed again because of a new COVID-19 outbreak. Distance education remained sole mechanism of instruction despite not meeting contextual needs
Nigeria	Varied; Alternating schedules (a.m./p.m. classes)	January 2021	Variations at state level including some reconstructed school buildings to allow social distancing; some increase in number of weeks of instruction to make up for lost time.
Zambia	Varied (blended and in-person)	June 2020/September 2020	Examination grades (7, 9, 12) returned to in-person learning June 2020 with adherence to physical distancing; full school reopening in September 2020 included alternating/shifted schedules to ensure physical distancing, decided on at school level; distance learning overall remained a challenge, so blended learning still not sufficient

2. MODELS OF RETURN: TEACHING AND LEARNING

With the new models of instruction and scheduling came necessary modifications in teaching and learning to accommodate those new models; however, what is clear across the case studies is that these plans were not prioritized in the initial RtL process. As of April 2021, these had not been further developed (Exhibit 11).

Exhibit 11. Modifications in teaching and learning when schools reopened

COUNTRY	CURRICULUM	EXAMINATION
Colombia	Wide range based on *Secretaría*: some adapted very little, others adapted significantly (e.g., including enhanced focus on social-emotional learning)	Wide range based on *Secretaría*: some decided to use examinations as formative rather than summative tools to determine promotion and instead focus on social-emotional learning; others with previously higher performance continued with exams as normal (expecting some, but not most, to fail)
Georgia	Limited adaptation for condensed learning from national level; dictated to school level as needed	Progression as usual (based on grades, not examinations); some changes to formative assessments by school
Lebanon	Limited adaptation for condensed learning schedule	Automatic progression from all learners from 2019/2020 to 2020/2021 academic year, regardless of examination results
Nigeria	State-dependent; in northeast: none identified by respondents aside from having some longer days or weekend days to catch up; EIEWG indicates in strategy that accelerated programming should be considered	Automatic progression from all learners from 2019/2020 to 2020/2021 academic year, regardless of examination results
Zambia	Limited adaptation for condensed learning from national level; specific schools and projects (including GPE grant implementers) did so at school or project level	Examination grades prioritized in return to in-person learning (three months prior to general reopening); national examinations extended a month (to December) to allow time to prepare

3. CONCLUSION

Efforts to minimize the impacts of COVID-19, particularly in the initial period of response, were largely absorptive in nature. Through school closure, responses sought first to minimize exposure to COVID-19, which learners, educators, and community members might face in educational settings. As it became clear that these closures would be more prolonged, attention turned to minimizing the risk that there would be permanent, negative impacts on participation and engagement in learning. Such initial attention was largely focused on minimizing impact, as well as deploying expertise, resources, and assets mostly already known and available, rather than innovating or recognizing new assets, networks, capacities.

SPOTLIGHT ON ADAPTIVE RESPONSES: POCKETS OF PROMISE

Through 2020 and into 2021, it became increasingly clear that COVID-19 would present a prolonged disruption to education systems globally; subsequently, the limitations of existing responses became apparent. However, examples emerged from the case studies of ways in which specific institutions/networks, local governments, schools and teachers, and civil society (including parents and the wider community) stepped in to address recognized needs and gaps. While the previous section primarily identified absorptive capacities across the case study locations, there were nonetheless many

examples of education actors leveraging the expertise, resources, and mechanisms available to them to adapt responses to the changing contexts and needs of learners. These actions—more adaptive in nature—were identified and described as "pockets of promise," and present opportunities for further engagement and development. This section presents a collection of pockets of promise but is by no means an exhaustive list of such pockets that have emerged during the COVID-19 response.

National/institutional responses

All five countries drafted national COVID-19 response plans and policy. Some were able to leverage the planning processes to address existing institutional weaknesses by building on existing resilience capacities.

MOBILIZATION OF EXISTING CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Mobilization of existing connections and relationships in the national response planning process garnered collective ownership and support for the response, and allowed the sector to leverage such processes for recovery and post-recovery actions as well.

For instance, in Zambia, the strong existing partnership between the Ministry of General Education and its education partners was immediately engaged and leveraged in response planning processes. The quick coordination between stakeholders to produce the Education Contingency Plan in April 2020 led directly to Zambia receiving $10 million in GPE funding in the first round of its accelerated funding mechanism. This funding allowed significant, immediate action to quickly fulfil the first actions planned. In planning processes, education partners strategically mapped efforts to avoid duplication, leveraged programming already in place to ensure access to marginalized learners, and networked to ensure funding for important measures. While much of the decision-making and planning were centralized, there was also wide consultation with key stakeholders and partners and across levels of government (from the Ministries of Health and General Education to sub-national levels such as province and district) throughout 2020. These collaborative planning processes connecting the layers of the education system resulted in diverse inputs to the process and collective ownership of the plan and its deployment.

These strong coalitions and connections across the system also allowed Zambia to leverage the planning processes to plan how to address not only short-term emergency and recovery needs, but also broader and longer-term structural gaps through post-recovery and system strengthening actions. Zambia's national contingency plan was three-phased (response, early recovery, and post-recovery) and focused on underlying vulnerabilities and the most marginalized learners.

Limitation: Despite its strong education planning processes and coalitions, Zambia is constrained in its development by continued and increasing macroeconomic vulnerability. The national COVID-19 response plan is comprehensive in its phased approach but, since funding was exhausted, many of the medium and longer-term plans have gone unrealized. Zambia is struggling to move beyond the initial phase of its COVID-19 response, regardless of its examples of good practice and strong coordination and networking capacity. This will perhaps have the most significant impact on the ability of the system to move beyond access and toward quality learning in the years to come.

LEVERAGING EXISTING DECENTRALIZED STRUCTURES

Leveraging existing decentralized structures in the national response plan allowed localized adaptation of RtL processes to meet unique contextual needs. For instance, in Colombia, the decentralized approach to reopening schools allowed autonomy for *Secretarías* to make their own context-specific plans. The national education reopening plan included guidelines for *Secretarías* to follow. In reopening schools, the national *alternancia educativa* plan offered a blended model in which schools would assess how to start allowing children to attend in-person classes while still offering spaces for distance learning. It was then the responsibility of each *Secretaría* to build its own return plans in consultation with the corresponding health *Secretaría*, taking into account its contextual realities and possibilities together with data related to COVID-19 prevalence. With the MoE's approval of the *Secretaría's* plan, each school would have to present its own protocols to the *Secretaría*, and when that was approved, it would be ready to return to in-person classes under the *alternancia educativa* scheme. To support decentralized processes, the MoE published a toolkit with seven tools to assist school reopening.[32] Each of these tools included content from UNICEF and other entities, along with the national protocols.

During the response, the government of Colombia also leveraged an existing model of cooperation across *Secretarías* , the G20, to support the development of contextually relevant and technically effective plans. The G20 consisted of a large group of MoE personnel in working groups supporting the 96 *Secretarías* to provide customized support, and was regarded as an important support facilitating spaces of co-creation and sharing between *Secretarías*, fostering a healthy competition to see which *Secretaría* would open first, and nudging some *Secretarías* to implement good practices that were working for others.

Limitation: Although the responses instituted to support the decentralized response were promising in many ways in supporting contextually responsive measures, they were also regarded by *Secretarías* in some parts of Colombia as a "double-edged sword;" while the diversity of the region was best suited for contextualized and customized *alternancia educativa* learning plans, some *Secretarías* and schools required considerably more support to design and implement feasible *alternancia educativa* protocols than others. Often, learners who required more assistance during COVID-19 response were those who were already marginalized, potentially entrenching existing inequities.

NATIONAL-LEVEL RECOGNITION OF SCHOOL-LEVEL LEADERSHIP

National-level recognition of school-level leadership fostered school-level autonomy and contextually relevant response.

For instance, throughout the pandemic in Georgia, there were many instances where the Ministry of Education and Science consulted with schools on certain decisions, gave schools a choice of response strategies, or left decisions to schools entirely. For example, options for schedule and modalities (shifts, online, hybrid) were crafted by the MoES, which then mandated schools to choose the option most

[32] Tools provided support to: (1) conduct a COVID-19 diagnosis of the city; (2) map teacher characteristics; (3) log the physical capacity and inventory of the schools; (4) assess the impact of the pandemic in the learning processes; (5) follow essential protocols for biosafety; (6) implement the *alternancia educativa* program; and (7) deploy essential school signage on health protocols.

appropriate to their context. Similarly, when teachers and parents expressed increasing concern about student formative assessment, the MoES developed assessment policy options that schools could choose from to apply across the entire school or to individual students. In some cases, the MoES delegated powers and responsibilities to schools and, specifically, principals. One school principal noted "I have never felt so much professional freedom in my career as a school principal;" two government officials interviewed for this study described the increased decision-making and leadership initiative between school principals as extremely positive.

Limitation: Not all school leaders had equal capacity to make many of these independent decisions, and some noted that, in regard to decisions about safety and health, encouraging school-level decision-making was perceived as less about school autonomy and more about deflecting responsibility onto schools.

RESPONSE PLANS LEVERAGING CAPACITIES

Countries quickly mobilized and adapted response plans that leveraged capacities built during response to previous crises.

For example, in Lebanon, the national-level NFE subsector leveraged an existing coordination mechanism, the education sector inter-agency coordination (IAC) group, to collectively mobilize and commence a response in March 2020. The IAC coordination group provides a platform through which local and international education actors coordinate to support the government through crises in Lebanon, most notably, the protracted Syrian crisis, which has led to approximately 1.5 million people from Syria currently residing in Lebanon, with approximately 30,000 children served by NFE services. The multi-level, multi-stakeholder IAC group has a connection with the government and strong United Nations leadership, and contains many humanitarian agencies that supported the group to respond immediately, comprehensively, and effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic. By April 2020, the group had conducted a needs assessment through its existing community networks, had drafted a joint action plan and had collated an online collection of resources for distance learning, including academic materials as well as psychosocial resources for learners, teachers, and parents supporting learning at home.

Based on the findings of the early and extensive needs assessment, the NFE sector was quickly able to pivot its activities and engage its learners in quality academic and psychosocial activities through the means identified as most accessible for all; namely, WhatsApp and similar applications. Through a virtuous cycle, the NFE sector's adaptive responses continued to build the sector's resilience by strengthening its evidence base and by creating a comprehensive open-source database of NFE resources for distance learning.

Limitation: Despite leveraging existing capacities to pivot rapidly and responsively in crisis, NFE responses remain limited in the national response to only those learners and their families within NFE services, due to their relative marginalization in current national education policy. As services for refugee learners are intrinsically linked to broader national policy, the opportunity for these adaptive capacities to also serve learners across the broader sector—especially as the need for expertise and responses focused on recovering lost learning and accelerated education grows in response to the pandemic—is currently inhibited.

Sub-national government, civil society, and teacher responses

Sub-national government structures, civil society, and teachers were central to responses across all locations, translating national plans to a local level and innovating to fill teaching and learning gaps not yet identified or accounted for at an institutional level.

WHERE SUB-NATIONAL GOVERNMENT STAKEHOLDERS FELT THERE WAS A GAP IN SUPPORT, THEY FILLED IT THEMSELVES

For example, in Colombia, to support teachers struggling to find ways to adapt curricula to ensure the continuity of learning and recover learning loss, the *Secretaría* of Barranquilla started providing support to schools to adapt the curriculum to overarching themes. Rather than designing study plans divided by subjects (math, science, biology), the state-level actors supported teachers to deploy accelerated learning models to design transversal scenarios or projects in which learners gain broad knowledge about areas while building subject-specific skills.

In Nigeria, when it was recognized early in the pandemic that the majority of learners in northern states had severely limited access to the national online learning solutions offered, state-level governments worked with international NGOs to identify innovative solutions to facilitate distance education for these marginalized learners. Some states and NGOs (in collaboration or independently) leveraged previous experience offering and/or supporting learning via radio. The school closure period therefore saw multiple synergies between government and international NGOs to further expand the scope of state-led and independent learning interventions using non-Internet-based resources. The State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) in Nigeria also established community-based learning centers where learners could gather around a radio to listen to the programming as it aired, and receive supplemental instruction from paid facilitators. This improved access beyond the scope of governmental provision for marginalized learners across northern Nigeria.

WHERE CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS FELT THERE WAS A GAP IN RESPONSE, THEY FILLED IT THEMSELVES

In Colombia, for example, although decentralized decision-making was largely regarded as a strength of the response, *Secretarías* noted that the lack of official data and information made their job difficult. This was partly solved with the rapid assessments and surveys administered, but, in general, collecting information during the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge. This encouraged civil society organizations to start publishing information on social media to inform the general public of the percentage of children, schools, venues, and *Secretarías* that had actually returned to in-person classes.[33] Afterwards, an education-focused foundation (*Fundación Empresarios por la Educación*) started publishing official data on its education observatory website,[34] which motivated the MoE to also start to publish information on its website. This proactive move from civil society encouraged the government to be more transparent about the state of the national strategy, particularly with regards to who was and was not participating in learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[33] For example, the #LEPEV – La Educación Presencial es Evital – movement.
[34] See https://www.obsgestioneducativa.com/reapertura-datos/.

WHERE PARENTS FELT THERE WAS A GAP IN SUPPORT, THEY FILLED IT THEMSELVES

In Colombia, Red PaPaz, the national corporation of parents, concerned that the return to in-person learning was delayed and advocating for a more diligent reopening of schools, pushed the return process forward by taking to social media and nudging local governments, schools, and even the MoE to reopen schools as fast as possible.[35] It filed legal proceedings on the MoE, some *Secretarías*, and the *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare) to accelerate the reopening of schools and centers for early childhood development and, in Antioquia, brought parents together with school principals or *Secretarías* to ask for faster action in the return process. The group leveraged these meetings to share good practices for reopening, to share their members' fears, and debunk misinformation and fake news. Ultimately, the actions of Red PaPaz were regarded as having helped expedite the return process, and having helped parents gain confidence in the process in various locations.

WHERE TEACHERS FELT THERE WAS A GAP IN SUPPORT, THEY FILLED IT THEMSELVES

In Georgia, when teachers felt that institutional support was lacking, they mobilized professional learning communities via social media to support each other with distance learning strategies. The purpose of professional learning communities fell into three general categories: (1) to host discussions and explanations of policy and issues; (2) to offer support for teachers to work in line with policies and regulations; and (3) to share pedagogical ideas and solutions. The size of the groups varied; some had 6,000 members and limited membership, while others exceeded 30,000 members. During the pandemic, the increase in the number of members and activity was highest for groups sharing practices and learning. One teacher Facebook group administrator explained the reason for the increase: "In other countries teachers have had many sources of technical or methodological material. But there are very few resources for Georgian teachers."

Similarly, in Lebanon, when teachers lacked access to the main online distance learning strategy offered nationally, they independently sought alternative ways to continue engagement with learners, especially via WhatsApp and other similar platforms, and sought teaching times when both they and their learners had access to the Internet, as Internet connection was very limited across the country.

Filling institutional gaps at sub-national levels

Many of these pockets of promise highlight how innovation at sub-national levels has emerged from gaps in national or institutional-level responses. Responses have also highlighted how the onus for ensuring that teaching and learning takes places—whether through distance or in-person strategies—lies at the school and teacher level. At a national level, investments in teaching and learning so far during COVID-19 have been focused primarily on access-related considerations rather than quality learning experiences, namely, ensuring platforms for engagement were set up and available and training teachers to use them. For example, initial national teacher training efforts in Lebanon and Georgia focused on navigating online platforms more than on adapting lessons and teaching methods for online delivery. The

[35] This social media movement has been very vocal under the #LaEducaciónPresencialEsVital and #ExijoElDerechoAlRecreoYa hashtags.

MoE in Colombia activated "emergency mitigation funds" specifically to help the *Secretarías* finance implementation of their biosafety protocols, but not for broader teaching or learning use.

Attention to learner engagement and social-emotional needs have also, thus far, fallen to teachers to manage independently. Teachers have largely carried the burden of balancing the need to ensure learner engagement and well-being with prevention of learning loss, while addressing their own personal needs and demands. Teachers have reported a lack of institutional guidance, support, and recognition while doing so. As described above, teachers in Georgia mobilized Facebook groups to support each other when institutional support was lacking, and teachers in Lebanon independently sought their own distance learning mechanisms when the national online strategy did not meet their own or their learners' needs. In Colombia, where the return to in-person teaching started, teachers were expected to alternate between teaching online classes and in-person classes. In the absence of specific national guidance on this, a teacher in Colombia wondered "how to integrate curriculums or study plans when there are two groups of students (in-person and online) carrying out different process but with the same number of teachers?"

At this point in the pandemic response, the strain of the expectations on teachers for ensuring teaching and learning has been underestimated and under-supported, and teachers have consistently noted across case study locations that they are exhausted.

National-level priorities during the first fourteen months of the pandemic

The public has demanded that education systems be accountable for children's safety during COVID-19, so, at a national level throughout the pandemic thus far, there has been focus first and foremost on ensuring the health and safety of teachers and learners. Response to COVID-19 has demanded education systems perform a delicate balancing act between maintaining (or gaining) public trust to protect children from COVID-19 exposure while concurrently making plans to return to in-person learning, a situation that might expose them to COVID-19. The balancing act was clear in Colombia where, as society urged the MoE, *Secretarías*, and schools to reopen (and, accordingly, for teachers to follow suit and parents to agree to send their children), there was pushback at the teacher and school level. In particular, concern remained that opening schools in person, even with biosafety measures in place, could increase COVID-19 transmission and risk the health of teachers, students, and those in the school community.

At the same time, there was no doubt that parents, learners, and teachers wanted to return to in-person learning; therefore, the heavy investment to ensure safety protocols throughout the return process was a reasonable early response to secure public trust and safety in this type of health crisis. As one government official in Zambia said:

> *"We worked hard at the Ministry level because we knew that when parents take their children to school, they are entrusting us to keep them safe. We worked hard to assure this and communicated to them specifically to 'please bring your children, we are ready and will take care of them'… We saw a positive response [i.e., learners returned]. We knew that they had their trust and so the health guidelines remain a priority for schools."*

Responses so far have largely been insufficient to address marginalization and vulnerability

What was clear across the case studies was that even when honing in on various strengths and pockets of promise, it was challenging to find sustained absorptive responses that sufficiently addressed the vulnerabilities of particular sub-populations in each country. More than that, the findings suggest that there is a significant risk that these populations may, in fact, suffer significant long-term impacts. In particular, in northeast Nigeria, Lebanon, some regions of Colombia (in *Secretarías* with less capacity to make and implement plans), and Zambia (because of national debt), there were already depleted resilience capacities worn down by existing stressors, so COVID-19 further pushed those areas down the path of vulnerability. In the midst of a crisis, it is very hard to address vulnerabilities, particularly those that existed before the COVID-19 pandemic. As evidenced in the case studies, the most that could be done was to provide recognition to some groups that they might be more sensitive or exposed to a risk like COVID-19 on both health and educational outcomes, but discrete programming to equalize the situation was limited.

4. APPLYING A RESILIENCE LENS TO THE COVID-19 RESPONSE EFFORTS

INTRODUCTION

This research set out to document the return to learning process in five distinct locations, focusing specifically on institutional-level decision-making, planning, and implementation of COVID-19 education response strategies, and leading to the synthesis of findings above. Simultaneously, a resilience lens was applied to both the iteration of the lines of inquiry for each wave and the overarching analysis. In other words, specific questions about resilience were rarely asked in interviews, and were not intended to measure or capture "amounts" of resilience, per se. Instead, a framework of resilience—as put forth in the USAID education and resilience white paper—was used to better understand (a) how systems understood and responded to the COVID-19 pandemic as either a discrete event/shock or as a shock-turned-stressor that occurred alongside other risk factors already known and prevalent in the system; and (b) the ways in which relationships, networks, and assets that existed across the education system could be leveraged to craft effective responses aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic on learning outcomes.

In many ways, by June 2021, it is still early to definitively comment on the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on the education sector or on the resilience of systems more broadly. The case studies highlight specific short-term impacts and their implications, but the longer-term effects of the pandemic (in terms of learning, but also broader socioeconomic recovery) will not be truly understood for years. For education, specifically, this research focused mainly on institutional-level planning, decision-making, and processes because of recognition that there was opportunity in tracking such decision-making to better understand rationale, constraints, and organizational and institutional learning in real time. A socioecological framing of resilience, however, led quickly to the realization that there was a need to ensure focus across the system. According to the USAID resilience white paper, "resilience manifests itself through social processes and within a broader system of relationships, networks, and assets that connects individuals, communities, and institutions to one another" (Shah 2019, 29). While this research rarely engaged directly with teachers, learners, or communities, it nonetheless offers significant insight into what was happening because of (or sometimes in spite of) institutional responses and action.

Resilience is a dynamic process, not an end state in itself. It was therefore not the intention of the research to claim a linear association between heightened resilience and reduced impacts of COVID-19. Additionally, because the parameters of resilience are both multi-sectoral and multi-scalar in nature, it is not appropriate to make a definitive statement about whether a particular system "is" or "is not" resilient. Rather, this research emphasizes the fact that there are some systems that may be better able to withstand and grow out of crises than others.

UNDERSTANDING EDUCATION SYSTEMS RESILIENCE

This section outlines key learning related to resilience that stems from application of a resilience lens. The key findings are structured under subsections that represent aspects of the USAID resilience white paper's resilience framework. These findings then lead into Section 5, where recommendations based on each finding are outlined.

Shocks and stressors

The nature and timeline of a crisis impacts the ways in which a system responds; country-level responses to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 shifted over time as the crisis evolved from a shock to a longer-term stressor.

At the outset of the pandemic, most countries moved to quickly close schools as part of nationwide lockdowns. These pathways diverged as context-specific and unique characteristics of exposure and response decision-making emerged in the months following school closures. Countries initially crafted response plans that would facilitate systems to absorb the impacts of COVID-19; however, plans required adaptation and flexibility due to the changing context of the crisis itself and in response to specific locations or populations affected differently.

Initial global responses—closing schools and short-term planning to continue to engage learners until they were back in the classroom—were largely absorptive strategies aimed at reducing the impact of COVID-19 (i.e., preventing spread and exposure and ensuring the safety of the population) in the short term. As COVID-19 was reconceptualized from a shock to a stressor over the months following initial schools closures (February–March 2020 in all case study locations),[36] differentiated responses both across and within countries reflected awareness of both longer-term trends (such as poor quality and limited reach of distance education) and the chronic and potentially protracted nature of impacts and implications (such as lower re-enrollment rates for girls and lower completion rates, especially at the secondary level).

In order to respond to longer-term trends—and with the realization that COVID-19 would be a crisis for much longer than originally anticipated—there was a need to begin to adapt and/or strengthen systems and structures on a more fundamental level, including considerations of educational service

[36] According to the resilience white paper, "Shocks are typically short-term, acute deviations from long-term trends that have substantial negative effects on people's current state of wellbeing, level of assets, livelihoods, and safety or their ability to withstand future shocks. Stressors, on the other hand, tend to be chronic, long-term trends, pressures, or protracted crisis that undermine the stability of a system and increase vulnerability within it" (Shah 2019, 23).

delivery and provision. For planning and strategy, this translated to moving beyond emergency response actions to thinking about recovery with COVID-19 in mind.

For example, in the initial months of the pandemic emergency response in all case study locations involved swiftly rolling out distance learning approaches. As COVID-19 continued, focus shifted towards reconsidering and adapting how instruction is designed and delivered in hybrid and online modalities. Alongside such longer-term thinking came the simultaneous need to acknowledge and better understand the localized impacts and needs across a country; continuous monitoring and processes for enabling feedback that resulted in up-to-date information allowed countries to pivot responses over time, as well as differentiate within the population itself. Given that shocks and stressors are a constant of all education systems—but may vary in their intensity, frequency, and overlap—the case studies emphasize the importance of moving from response to recovery/preparedness even as COVID-19 maintains it presence and impact.

There were notable examples in the case studies of an awareness of longer-term thinking and impacts. In Zambia, the main national planning document to guide COVID-19 response—the Education Contingency Plan for COVID-19—explicitly outlines three phases of systems-level response activities. These include (1) a Phase 1 Response Plan focused largely on continuity of learning during school closures, (2) a Phase 2 Early Recovery Plan that includes plans for reopening of schools and return to in-person learning, and (3) a Post-Recovery Plan focused on system strengthening.

The resilience of the education system during COVID-19 was deeply interconnected with other, ongoing shocks and stressors specific to that location. Shocks and stressors are interdependent; new shocks, such as COVID-19, may be a catalyst for or exacerbate other ongoing stressors. In Lebanon, COVID-19 exacerbated an ongoing economic crisis and then increased vulnerability of populations to further economic degradation; additionally, new shocks such as the August 4, 2020 port explosion stressed an overburdened health system, which again affected channels of exposure to COVID-19.

Multi-shock and multi-stressor contexts such as Lebanon and Nigeria were inherently challenged to leverage or build resilience capacities due to the interactions between conflict, displacement crisis, economic crisis, and unpredictable shock events (such as the port explosion in Lebanon or numerous school abductions throughout 2020 in northeast Nigeria). Examination of resilience—and an in-depth understanding of its meaning and application—is particularly important in contexts where resilience and vulnerability pathways are often non-linear and interdependent.

In complex contexts characterized by an ongoing, frequent need to respond and adapt, education systems have previously deployed mechanisms to be flexible, adaptable, and attentive to differential impacts pre-COVID-19. For northeast Nigeria, where ongoing conflict has led to frequent school interruptions over the past decade, mobilizing actors to respond to school closures had precedence. The EIEWG—already active in that location—mobilized quickly to respond to COVID-19. In addition, radio programming and other distance learning solutions were not new, and thus, there was opportunity to adapt and scale quickly. In Colombia, experiences throughout the long-standing conflict meant that municipalities, schools, and civil society had experience operating with limited (or no) support from the state. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they were therefore ready to deploy their own capacities to act, and were already aware of more localized needs and impacts.

According to the USAID resilience white paper, it is important to acknowledge that all education systems operate against a backdrop of shocks and stressors; this is particularly true of the contexts in which USAID operates. While the intensity, duration, and scope of reach of a given crisis may vary, it is important to understand how systems have responded to past and ongoing crises, including how they adapt through appropriate preparedness and planning mechanisms. Tools—like USAID's Rapid Education and Risk Analysis (RERA) and USAID's Political Economy Analysis toolkit[37]—prompt multidimensional consideration of context. Importantly, though, these tools are likely most effectively used *not just at the start* of a program cycle, but continuously to track not only the risk factors in a system but also how the system evolves (or not) in response to such risks. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, demonstrates the ways in which change occurs in the crisis itself but also in the ways in which systems respond to such change.

For education system actors (including USAID), such updated contextual knowledge allows for identification of where adaptation and capacities are deployed most effectively (and where they are not), and for action to be taken in response. This includes recognition of positive deviance and pockets of promise that can be scaled or otherwise leveraged.

Box 1: Learning from the RERA in Colombia

A RERA provides a "good enough" snapshot of the education sector and its intersection with other contextual risks that lead to challenges in providing equitable, quality education, but also highlights the existing assets that can be leveraged for a more effective response. At the beginning of the pandemic, a RERA for Colombia was being planned and, by April 2020, was adapted to be conducted fully remotely and to probe into issues surrounding the school closures that had since occurred during May and June 2020. The timing of the rapid assessment was, in a way, lucky, as it provided an initial look at how the closures were affecting marginalized students, including Venezuelans (data for which was otherwise not available). For example, it found that Venezuelan students were already struggling with school enrollment documentation, different academic content, calendars, and pedagogical approaches, but equally, it found that many Colombian students were struggling with accessing technological resources for remote learning.

Exposure and sensitivity

COVID-19 was (and is) not experienced uniformly within a population. Those most marginalized pre-crisis (including those most at risk of poor educational outcomes) were also the most sensitive and potentially exposed during COVID-19.

As stated above, school closures in response to COVID-19 were commonly enacted in its immediate outset. However, despite the presumption that all segments of society were equally at risk and susceptible to COVID-19, it became quickly apparent that there were particular segments of populations who were more sensitive or exposed to contracting it. Public health responses around the world adapted to take more targeted and nuanced approaches to protect those most vulnerable (for

[37] For the USAID RERA, see https://www.eccnetwork.net/resources/rapid-education-and-risk-analysis-rera-toolkit. For the USAID Political Economy Analysis, see https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/PEA2018.pdf.

example, the elderly or those living in overcrowded conditions) and, later, to prioritize vaccination for those at highest risk. In education responses to COVID-19, however, there was varying capacity across the five countries to acknowledge the differential impacts of COVID-19 on groups of learners/communities (based on their sensitivity to the impacts of prolonged school disruption and closures) and their relative risk of exposure to COVID-19 in school settings.

Some countries started to monitor these impacts early on, and others continued to pursue a more universal set of responses that was divorced from need. In some locations, these non-uniform impacts were directly tied to specific characteristics of COVID-19 itself. For example, in all of the case study locations, there were lower case rates in rural areas, where populations were smaller and generally more spread out, than in urban areas. In Georgia, the eight major cities ended up on a different trajectory (and modalities) of return to learning than the smaller cities and rural areas. While all schools across the country returned to in-person learning in September, school-level monitoring and tracking of case rates quickly showed that, in the major cities, the risk of exposure at school was too great. Schools in the eight cities transitioned back to online distance learning, while all other schools remained in person.

Much of the non-uniformity of how populations experienced COVID-19 related to pre-crisis vulnerabilities. In other words, those most marginalized pre-COVID-19 were also those most likely to be more exposed and more sensitive to it. Therefore, differentiated responses also needed to account for the ways in which COVID-19 could potentially exacerbate prior vulnerabilities by ensuring a specified focus on those populations.

In Zambia, GPE funding was used for projects in 20 districts in five provinces that were deemed vulnerable by the Central Statistics Office. Implementing partners that already operated in those districts implemented context-specific programs appropriate for the specific learners targeted (for example, girls).

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic experiences emphasize that a starting point for response efforts in any crisis should be an understanding of which populations are most exposed and most sensitive to the particular set of risk factors present.

Education systems that acknowledged (and ideally measured) differences in sensitivity and exposure to educational risk—and that, additionally, had in place mechanisms to afford flexibility in response to these needs as part of an overarching strategy—were likely the most poised to reduce negative educational outcomes as a result of COVID-19. While the details of such negative educational outcomes are not yet fully understood, the case studies provide evidence of education systems with clear pathways aimed at reducing negative impacts for those most marginalized pre-COVID-19. Additionally, those same systems that recognized such differentiated vulnerabilities were also best positioned to respond to COVID-19 in needs-based ways. In this way, the case studies emphasize the need for equity and inclusion to be prominently foregrounded in response to crisis.

While the USAID resilience white paper and the resilience framework present this point, the case studies point to its fundamental role in understanding and ultimately building both an effective response to COVID-19 and increased resilience in education systems more broadly. This point and the specific emphasis on these concepts—exposure and sensitivity—*at the outset of crisis and response* could be more strongly emphasized by ministries of education and others in the education system.

When initial response efforts are mobilized with a resilience focus, equity and inclusion are inherently at the core. This is because when the concepts of exposure and sensitivity are examined, it leads education system actors to better understand the differentiated nature of risk and vulnerability. Such clear understanding of differentiated vulnerability and potential impact then emphasizes that effective responses will not be entirely universal and, instead, will emphasize more needs-based or needs-aware programming that is aware of the interdependence of the new crisis with other, ongoing shocks/stressors.

Education systems and capacities

In all case study locations, there were varying examples of how systems were able to effectively leverage pre-COVID-19 capacities.

Pre-crisis resilience capacities significantly impact resilience trajectory and, in the case of a complex, intense, and protracted shock/stressor such as COVID-19, many systems have both struggled and succeeded in leveraging such capacities.

Across the case study locations, there were many examples of pre-COVID-19 capacity translated to effective action, or at least pockets of promise, that may indicate potential for future positive impact. This included acknowledging strengths and experience in the existence and mobilization of networks for collaboration and coordination (Zambia, Nigeria, Lebanon); significant empowering of decentralized actors and their localized knowledge and capacities to act quickly (Georgia, Colombia); cross-sectoral collaboration and integration of efforts (all); and past experiences with distance or other alternative modalities of education delivery (all).

Box 2: Leveraging pre-COVID-19 capacities

In northeastern Nigeria, it was recognized early in the pandemic that the majority of learners had severely limited access to ICT learning solutions offered at the national level. In response, state governments and international NGOs worked together to identify innovative solutions to facilitate distance education for marginalized learners. Some states and NGOs (either in collaboration or independently) leveraged previous experience offering and/or supporting learning via radio. The school closure period therefore saw multiple synergies between government and international NGOs to further expand the scope of state-led and independent learning interventions using non-Internet-based resources. This improved access, beyond the scope of governmental provision, to varying degrees across northern Nigeria. In Borno, a SUBEB informant suggested that this type of alternative learning was becoming increasingly institutionalized in the state's education system, mentioning that since COVID-19 reopening, and during the holidays or in the event of other emergencies that required students to stay home, the lessons continued. He also indicated that SUBEB has plans to establish a mini radio station within its premises to continue such broadcasts in the future, and that land had been provided by the Borno state government to establish this station.

In Zambia, there were already strong networks of coordination via technical working groups prior to the pandemic, which allowed for timely and effective collaboration between education stakeholders throughout the 2020 response. In April 2020, the Ministry of General Education and

its collaborating partners quickly produced the national Education Contingency Plan for COVID-19, which led directly to Zambia receiving GPE funding in the first round of its accelerated funding mechanism awarded in May 2020. This funding allowed significant, immediate action to quickly implement the first actions planned. The fast and coordinated action of this established network of partners was, according to respondents for this research, a notable strength of the overall response.

In Colombia, prior to COVID-19, a strategy had been developed by the Ministry of Education to better support *Secretarías* that had evident gaps in capacity. This support was customized to the *Secretarías*, and envisioned a large degree of in-person technical support. At the onset of COVID-19, this strategy was adapted into the G20 model in which the MoE would provide support specifically around the planning and implementation of the *Secretarías'* RtL plans, with the intention of providing more equitable opportunities for schools to provide support to teachers and education to learners.

However, a difference across case study locations was in how or the extent to which countries effectively capitalized on these pockets of promise. Unsurprisingly, complex contexts with multiple interacting shocks and stressors had significant constraints to navigate while responding to COVID-19; still, these contexts also exhibited potential for having learned from past or other ongoing crises.

Where countries (or more localized regions or actors in the system) had a track record of learning from, adapting to, and seeking transformation of factors underpinning education system vulnerability, there was perhaps a stronger ability to recognize and draw on the resources already available in an attempt to mitigate the blow of COVID-19 to the system. This was evident in Georgia, where there had been significant efforts to build school- and district-level leadership in recent decades. This decentralized capacity was then leveraged during the COVID-19 pandemic. National-level responses (for example, in recommendations for assessment during distance learning) involved providing options for potential response actions that could be strategically selected as most appropriate by leaders at the district or school levels. Additionally, capacity development at the regional level had led to strong monitoring processes and reporting from school to region to national levels. With many of these structures already in place and working effectively, the Government of Georgia was able to be responsive to more localized needs as well as to develop new and innovative mechanisms for additional feedback from the local level.

In some locations, limited government-led response led to education actors taking a strong role in responding to COVID-19. This was particularly true in Lebanon and northern Nigeria, where the well-coordinated structures of EIEWG may be understood as a capacity in and of itself. In both of these case study locations, the complex multi-shock and multi-stressor context meant that technical and financial resources mobilized by these external actors to support ongoing government-led efforts were (and are) a critical aspect of understanding the resilience of the education system as a whole. Zambia, too, was characterized by an ambitious agenda for educational quality improvement and reform but limited financing to accomplish this agenda, a challenge that predates COVID-19. The country's ability to access international financing and support to complement its internal domestic resource base, however, is itself

a capacity, as evidenced by the fact that strong coordination and collaboration between state and non-state actors is an important prerequisite for obtaining GPE funding. Zambia's macroeconomic vulnerabilities certainly do (and will continue to) factor into its ongoing response capacity (i.e., only the "response" phase of the Contingency Plan is currently funded, with no financing for the recovery or post-recovery plans), but it was nonetheless able to leverage capacities built through other shocks/stressors to secure initial response funding.

Like responses generally, resilience capacities leveraged during COVID-19 should be considered across the course of the pandemic. During the "emergency" phase, capacities observed were largely absorptive in nature. Adaptive capacities were deployed to some extent in all contexts, but this looked different both across and within countries. Ultimately, there was some potential for transformative capacities—which seek to address the underlying causes of vulnerability—but it is too early to observe those capacities manifest.

Absorptive capacities involved, for example, closing schools and establishing initial distance learning plans. These aimed to reduce the permanent, negative impact of COVID-19 on learners. Adaptive capacities were particularly prevalent at the level of teachers and administrators, who responded to their own professional needs and the needs of their learners in a manner that was both informed by and cognizant of the need to make longer-term changes to pre-COVID-19 practices. Adaptive capacities were additionally observed in the empowerment of decentralized education actors.

Many of the identified pockets of promise offer potential for adaptive responses to be leveraged into transformative change. Transformative capacities were more difficult to identify in this research, largely because they will take longer to manifest. What is clear, however, is that an enabling environment for such change is one in which there is collective engagement across levels of the system aimed at addressing underlying causes of vulnerability rather than simply anticipating future shocks. An enabling environment during COVID-19 was characterized by precedence set pre-crisis for actions like decentralized decision-making, coordination and communication mechanisms, data-driven systems and decision-making, and equity-focused initiatives and mentoring.

Box 3: Transforming VET policy in Georgia

In Georgia, vocational education and training (VET) colleges closed alongside all education institutions in the country in March 2020. In contrast to other levels of education, however, VET colleges did not move to distance learning in the spring and instead remained closed entirely until September. This full closure was based on the assumption that many VET-specific classes and skills could not be effectively taught online. However, as the pandemic progressed, the country reconsidered this approach.

The Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) facilitated opportunities for VET leaders and teachers to come together to reflect on the potential of a distance learning hybrid option, and then engaged with additional external stakeholders (such as EFT, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank) to learn about practices in other countries and evidence from research. An international conference was held, which included participation from government agencies,

administrators, and teachers from VET providers, and the Georgian Chamber of Trade. The MoES VET team is currently planning to introduce a reform program for accommodating online distance learning in VET programs moving forward. Research respondents from this VET team described the reform as a means of making VET more accessible across Georgia. This may in turn strengthen the sector's resilience to future shocks and stressors beyond COVID-19.

This potential change is likely the most dramatic policy shift in Georgia during COVID-19. It also serves as a key example of a context where education and government actors demonstrated a willingness to learn and adjust away from norms and assumptions that were present pre-COVID-19 when confronted with new information and new circumstances.

A diversity of actors and approaches across the education system—as well as redundancy and multiple entry points to address specific challenges—support the resilience of the education system as a whole. Decentralized planning, processes, and response allows for more flexible and context-specific decision-making.

Effective decentralized responses were found to be a notable pocket of promise in multiple case study locations (Georgia and Colombia, in particular). Specific regions/decentralized actors are best positioned to make decisions about what is most appropriate and relevant to their location, schools, and learners. During COVID-19, this was clear since there were pronounced regional differences across countries in terms of levels of exposure, such as in large cities or border towns with cross-border traffic. As was noted earlier, a system's ability to stagger responses as needed ensured that school closures—namely later in the pandemic—did not necessarily have to apply uniformly and learners in less-affected areas could continue in-person education.

COVID-19 offered an interesting opportunity to examine a combination of centralized and decentralized decision-making in most countries studied. Most public health guidance originated at the national level with ministries of health (all case studies). Since most school reopening plans were aligned with health standards, these were also led by national actors. Still, most locations then deferred additional decision-making to more localized actors.

Empowerment of regional or district level education bodies was most effective when it occurred alongside continued national guidance as well as technical and financial support. For both Colombia and Georgia, national guidelines and priorities were set, but left to sub-national units to implement. Colombia offered continued technical support to the *Secretaría* level that may indicate learning from past crisis. Georgia tapped into the capacity of its regional Education Resource Centers for localizing response decision-making, and increased mechanisms and frequency of communication from sub-national to national actors that informed ongoing strategy and planning. Both locations were characterized by national institutions empowering decentralized actors alongside significant ongoing support. In contrast, in Nigeria, national priorities were set, but school reopening plans were delegated entirely to states; it was then challenging to discern what those state-level plans were and how they were supported by the central government.

While decentralization was one mechanism for more specified and diverse response efforts, a crisis such as COVID-19 offered space for new, innovative, and diverse approaches to educational challenges to emerge. COVID-19 offers a poignant example of how—across the world—informal and creative solutions may be innovated in the face of ongoing crisis. Positive deviances that emerged during COVID-19 may have potential to transfer to other locations or be adopted by other actors. They support greater redundancy in the system when they offer alternative options to those of the formal system that may be more effective in context.

Redundancy and diversity, in this case, refer to the multiple strategies and actions undertaken by various actors to address a problem (for example, strategies that are different across regions/districts). Additionally, this may include non-state actors such as technical working groups or the non-formal education sector. In Lebanon, the NFE subsector was able to leverage its collaborative structure (the IAC coordinating group) and existing policy (RACE II)—both engaged in response to non-COVID-19 crisis—to deploy rapid and well-informed response. In northern Nigeria and Zambia, technical education working groups comprised of ministry, NGO, and civil society actors mobilized immediately to support the development and implementation of COVID-19 education response. In each country, implementing organizations within these groups adopted response strategies to complement government-led efforts (which were often deployed quickly in certain locations in the country).

In addition to such redundancies, in the case of an acute crisis such as COVID-19, there was distinct opportunity for innovation and diversity to flourish. In Georgia, informal networks of support for teachers emerged quickly after the start of the crisis (elaborated on in Box 4).

Box 4: Informal networks of support for teachers in Georgia

During the initial stages of the pandemic, teachers in Georgia demonstrated significant skills and motivation in self-organizing to support one another for distance learning. New channels of professional learning communities—largely centered around Facebook groups—emerged to discuss new policies and issues for their classrooms during COVID-19, and to share pedagogical ideas and solutions. These groups shared resources and learning and centered on a new culture of trust. A respondent explained that: "[Before the pandemic] it was very uncommon for teachers to share something of their own with other teachers. They seemed to be afraid of feedback…this was a clear sign of the lack of trust among teachers; they would hide their own findings from each other. Now the space has opened; if a teacher finds something that works, they want others to use it too."

In one Facebook group, a 300-person membership pre-COVID-19 grew to over 30,000 during the height of the pandemic. While support to teachers was organized formally via the national Teacher Professional Development Center, these nimble informal networks were able to offer swift and personalized support as teachers navigated the challenges of distance learning and eventually returning to school.

Overall, decentralized planning, processes, and responses during COVID-19 afforded greater diversity and contextually relevant actions. Importantly, there is great opportunity in identifying and learning from

where localized responses lead to better outcomes than in other locations or nationally. Resilience depends on various actors and enabling environments that support and cultivate such small-scale pockets of promise.

An important implication of the recognition of "pre-crisis capacity" is that stakeholders must recognize that building resilience is a long-term, cross-sectoral, and context-specific process. Strengthening overall education system resilience is a long-term investment that spans the spectrum of humanitarian/development responses.

As countries continued to respond to the ongoing stressors of COVID-19—from second waves of increased case rates and additional school closures to more widespread and deepening economic impacts—there was limited opportunity to "plan for" increasing resilience of the system itself in real time. In contrast, countries saw such capacities depleted as initial, emergency funding ran out and longer-term impacts (such as learning loss) became apparent. Still, there were good examples of resilience capacities already embedded in education systems that—while perhaps not yet able to fully manifest—indicate foundations for positive growth in the future.

Periods of acute crisis are simultaneously times when latent capacities become visible, deviances from the norm more commonplace, and diversity of responses more likely. In these moments, such responses are attuned largely to mitigating the worst impacts of a crisis, but they also offer scope for learning and more institutional adaptation and change. What is most important for generating systems-level resilience building is the ways in which these actions are acknowledged and built on in the midst of and following the acute phase of a crisis, and how they feed into longer-term recovery and response mechanisms at a systemic level.

The Zambian Contingency Plan outlines response, recovery, and post-recovery phases; these phases will now, hopefully, be integrated into updated sector planning. For multiple case study locations (Lebanon, Zambia), new education strategic plans are currently being reviewed and rewritten in 2021. There is significant potential, then, to integrate COVID-19-prompted learning into these plans.

While "planning" for resilience during COVID-19 was challenging in all locations, there was nonetheless significant opportunity to learn about resilience and resilience-building throughout the course of the pandemic due to its protracted nature. In particular, COVID-19 offered a unique opportunity for education systems to learn and apply lessons in real time as subsequent (and often larger) waves of COVID-19 occurred. Indeed, in all countries, the process of return to learning shifted toward recurring school closing/reopening. In Zambia, a government-level respondent described the first wave of COVID-19 as the "pilot" for subsequent surges and school closures. In addition to learning across the pandemic, the pockets of promise (manifestations of resilience themselves) indicate potential to learn from and scale such practices.

Resilience and vulnerability pathways

COVID-19 helps us understand the relationship between education system resilience and wider societal resilience, and the mutual relation between them. In the coming years—as countries and the global economy work toward recovery from COVID-19—this relationship will (and should) be further emphasized.

The USAID resilience white paper emphasizes the importance of education to the capacity of societies to withstand and grow from the adversities it faces. COVID-19 was a global crisis with very local manifestations. As the pandemic unfolded in the five case study countries, the importance and centrality of a robust and functioning education system became apparent in its relation to wider societal resilience. This was specifically observed in relation to five main points. First, in several of the case study countries, educational institutions or educational personnel acted as important conduits and hubs for communicating public health messages, supporting vaccination campaigns, ensuring children's welfare was maintained, etc.

Second, local schools often became symbols of the state's level of care and response for its citizens in the midst of a pandemic. In Zambia, Georgia, and Colombia, respondents from ministries of education emphasized the critical responsibility that fell to education actors from the ministry level to the school level.

Box 5: Education as a critical hub in Colombia

The closure of schools in Colombia highlighted the role of schools as a protective environment for children and communities. As one of the informants from an international NGO that operates in Cúcuta said, "in rural areas the school has a value beyond the classes… the role of the teacher is that of a community leader who summons everyone in the community around the dynamics of the school." The reality that was made plain during COVID-19 closures was that schools are indispensable: it is not just where learning happens and where teacher and parent training occurs, it is a hub for community meetings, delivery of different types of social services (e.g., meal plans), vaccines distribution, networking locales, and spaces where children and youth find refuge and caring adults. If the national government and other stakeholders had recognized this, truly, then according to one key informant, "they (schools) wouldn't have been the first to close and the last to reopen." COVID-19 and all that was lost by closing schools may provide a window of opportunity to build on this realization to further convince stakeholders that education should be a national priority.

Across all case study locations, there was a focus on hygiene, physical distancing, and health reporting and response mechanisms. This emphasis on school readiness and compliance was described as critical to ensuring that the trust of parents in the education system (and, thus, the state) was not misplaced. Governments used the school reopening process as a visible symbol of their capacity to respond to and address citizen concerns. In Georgia, the government's response—from the closures of schools and businesses to official strategies for reopening—were perceived positively by the majority of the public throughout the crisis. The positive perception of public institutions was significantly *higher* during the first COVID-19 wave than the pre-COVID-19 period; from December 2019 to May 2020, the share of the population that perceived the prime minister to be performing "well" or "very well" increased from 21 percent to 63 percent (CRRC 2020). The Georgia case study also elucidated ways in which new mechanisms for feedback from the public to the Ministry of Education and Science (e.g., Facebook Messenger) were enabled and capitalized on to inform decision-making at the national level. These new mechanisms, as well as a willingness to hear and adapt action based on that feedback, offered opportunities for both more effective policy and practice, and a deeper sense of trust in state

institutions by the public. Conversely, lack of public trust was also evident in some contexts (e.g., Lebanon and Nigeria), a point that is reflected in literature but was not additionally elaborated on in this research.

Third, moving beyond the immediacy of crisis response, there is a recognition in several countries that education will be key to wider recovery from COVID-19, especially in regard to the profound global economic impacts of the crisis. In almost all of these contexts, COVID-19 has laid bare and exacerbated existing societal inequalities. It has also frayed the social contract between citizens and state, and led to growing macroeconomic challenges for national governments as they deal with the long-term burdens of debt that they have taken on in response to COVID-19. By the end of 2020, the estimated impact of COVID-19 and its policy responses on extreme poverty worldwide was staggering, with an estimated 120 million more individuals in extreme income poverty than in 2019. According to estimates based on World Bank data, half of these impacts may be permanent (Kharas 2020). Globally, there are significant new challenges and barriers to meeting many of the Sustainable Development Goals (Shulla 2021). Relevant to this research, Nigeria ranks second globally in terms of rates of extreme poverty increase (Kharas 2020). Like resilience generally, economic impact and recovery will not be uniform around the world; for many countries (such as, for example, the United States or China), the economic impact of COVID-19 has registered mainly as a shock characterized by recession and recovery. For the majority of countries, however, economic recovery will be much longer term and the overall economic impact of COVID-19 will likely be greater. Based on the above-mentioned predictions, Nigeria, for example, may register higher extreme poverty numbers in 2030 than 2020 (Kharas 2020).

As a 2020 UNESCO paper suggests, the education sector will be fundamental to national recovery, and ultimately, to transformation post-COVID-19 (International Commission on the Futures of Education 2020). Education will continue to be a fundamental driver of national growth and human capital development. Failure to return to the trajectory the world was on pre-COVID-19 in relation to SDG 4 could lead to a loss of nearly $10 trillion in income-earning potential in the future and much higher incidences of populations living in abject poverty for several generations to come, according to World Bank estimations (World Bank 2020).

On the other hand, education system responses in the five case study countries have also made clear the importance of resilient and adaptable economic, social, political, and health systems in times of adversity. In certain locations—namely, Lebanon and Nigeria—complex and multidimensional systemic vulnerabilities, too, affect the resilience of education systems. COVID-19 response efforts globally have been entwined with economic, political, and social vulnerabilities and impacts on a global scale. While there are certainly economic implications to most crises, the global nature of COVID-19 and the impacts of worldwide lockdowns and restrictions have led to an impending debt crisis at scale. This has affected response efforts to date, and will continue to do so during recovery efforts in the coming years.

As countries' debt burden increases, public expenditure on education, health, and other social protection decreases. Zambia—which became the first African country to default on its debt in the COVID-19 era in November 2020—saw reduction in public expenditure on education (alongside other sectors) for 2021 during a time when the Education Contingency Plan was still largely unfunded. Zambia offers a stark example of how resilience of the education sector is intrinsically tied to the resilience of the economy broadly. With decreasing public expenditure on education—and across all sectors—it is important to acknowledge that there are significant barriers to recovery and building resilience that are

fundamentally due to a lack of financing. In many of the countries studied here, there will be increased need to solicit foreign aid to support recovery trajectories. Overall, dependence on such aid to fill national spending gaps is absolutely necessary, but not sustainable.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has documented the return to learning process in five countries, focusing specifically on institution-level decision-making, planning, and implementation of COVID-19 education response strategies. Simultaneously, a resilience lens was applied to both the iteration of the lines of inquiry for each wave and the overarching analysis, specifically referencing the USAID education and resilience white paper. This resilience framing facilitates a better understanding of (a) how systems understood and responded to the COVID-19 pandemic as either a discrete event/shock or as a shock-turned-stressor that interacted with other risk factors already known and prevalent in the system and (b) the ways in which relationships, networks, and assets that existed across the education system pre-COVID-19 were leveraged to frame effective responses to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on learning outcomes.

In many ways, in June 2021, it is still early to definitively comment on COVID-19 impacts on the education sector or on the resilience of systems more broadly. The case studies highlight specific short-term impacts and their implications, but the longer-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (in terms of learning, but also broader socioeconomic recovery) will not be truly understood for years.

Still, the research has led to several important insights that may be of use to education stakeholders eager to further conceptualize resilience. These insights have been collated and are presented in Exhibit 12, and are linked to the specific findings as outlined in the previous section.

Exhibit 12. Key findings and recommendations

Key finding: COVID-19 must be understood today as more of a long-term stressor on education systems than just an acute shock.	
Recommendation or implication for USAID Center for Education and USAID Bureaus	**Recommendation or implication for USAID Missions and partners in-country (including ministries of education and higher education)**
Consideration should be given to revising the return to learning framework, specifically, its treatment of COVID-19 as a discrete shock on education systems around the world. The framework needs to focus more on how education systems might respond differently to COVID-19 based on (a) the intersections the pandemic is having with other chronic stressors and (b) the severity and prevalence of COVID-19 and its impact on educational access and engagement. Responses then must be seen as a continuum of preparedness, response, and recovery activities and actions, and where systems need to use the period of "return" to invest in preparedness measures to minimize learning loss, particularly for the most vulnerable. COVID-19-specific support and guidance from the Center for Education and other Bureaus must be situated within, rather than separated from, wider resilience-focused efforts. This is particularly important in many of the multi-hazard, complex crisis contexts where COVID-19 is just one of many ongoing stressors on education (and other) systems.	As part of considering how programs and strategies may need to pivot at a country level in response to COVID-19, attention needs to be given to the current and potential future risk the pandemic, in combination with other stressors, might have on investments. For example, in countries where vaccination rates remain low, ongoing disruptions to schooling because of COVID-19 will remain a reality. In contexts where management of the pandemic is stronger, investments might want to focus on recovery approaches that identify and target learners who have been made more vulnerable by the pandemic and preparedness measures that better protect these learners from future shocks. This will likely require cross-sectoral engagement that brings together health, social protection, livelihoods, and education programming. Recognizing that COVID-19 is likely to have enduring impacts on education systems, a longer-term approach must be taken to address the additional stress it has placed on achievement of development-oriented education outcomes. This necessitates finding coherence and alignment between humanitarian and development-focused structures and mandates and identifying collective outcomes and priorities across both streams of funding. Ministries of education and higher education and their partners also need to identify how COVID-19 response and recovery plans can be aligned to and/or help (re)shape priorities specified in longer-term education strategic plans.

Key finding: The resilience of the education system during COVID-19 was deeply interconnected with other, ongoing shocks and stressors specific to that location.	
Recommendation or implication for the USAID Center for Education and USAID Bureaus	**Recommendation or implication for USAID Missions and partners in-country (including ministries of education and higher education)**
Continue to push for the use of risk-informed planning and processes across all educational programs and responses. Specifically, and aligned with the recommendations of the education and resilience white paper, the Center for Education needs to continue to strengthen utilization of analytical tools such as the RERA and PEA to capture dimensions of risk and resilience throughout the program cycle, and to re-evaluate and refer back to such work as part of formulating responses to COVID-19 or any other shock.	At a country level, when a significant shock like COVID-19 arises, ensure immediate needs assessments and analyses are juxtaposed and considered alongside sectoral and country-level assessments of risks and incentives/capacities for change that may be done in setting country level strategies. As part of this, AORs and CORs may need to be trained on how to use data from RERAs to support risk-informed programming and to use adaptive management practices to pivot action accordingly. Facilitate knowledge sharing among USAID partners in-country, particularly around various needs and risk assessments done since the start of COVID-19, to jointly understand the key vulnerabilities facing the education system, institutions, communities, and learners and to ensure risk-informed and responsive action in light of the pandemic.

Key finding: Those most marginalized pre-crisis (including those most at risk of poor educational outcomes) were also the most sensitive and potentially exposed during COVID-19. Overall, COVID-19 experiences emphasize that a starting point for response efforts in any crisis should be in understanding which populations are most exposed and most sensitive to the particular set of risk factors present.	
Recommendation or implication for the USAID Center for Education and USAID Bureaus	**Recommendation or implication for USAID Missions and partners in-country (including ministries of education and higher education)**
Reframe the focus on equity and inclusion within the return to learning framework around concepts of sensitivity and exposure from the resilience white paper. Specifically, stress in all guidance the importance of starting responses with the acknowledgement that the pandemic has not affected all learners and communities equally, and that resilience (and equity-focused) programming starts by understanding those who are most exposed and sensitive to adverse impacts of the pandemic in terms of opportunities to learn. Give more emphasis to understanding and using concepts of exposure and sensitivity, terms from the resilience framework that support the centrality of equity and inclusion, to help apply concepts of resilience.	Ensure that USAID Mission priorities and actions, as well as those of partners and ministries, are differentiated and responding to evidence on who the most marginalized are because of the pandemic, and how such responses will reduce their exposure to health and education-related risks and reduce their sensitivity to the effects to school closures and the continuance of hybrid modalities of learning.

Key finding: Pre-crisis resilience capacities significantly impact resilience trajectory and, in the case of a complex, intense, and protracted shock/stressor such as COVID-19, many systems have both struggled and succeeded in leveraging such capacities.	
Recommendation or implication for the USAID Center for Education and USAID Bureaus	**Recommendation or implication for USAID Missions and partners in-country (including ministries of education and higher education)**
As the Center for Education and USAID continue to support uptake and utilization of the education and resilience white paper, it is important that when using the annexes/tools embedded within it (and particularly Annex 4), those using it understand that: Resilience capacities do not manifest themselves in the same way across all contexts. It cannot be presumed that a specific set of conditions, abilities, assets, strategies, networks, and relationships will always operate similarly. Rather, their ability to protect learning and well-being outcomes may be mediated by the complexity, intensity, duration, and scale of a given shock or set of stressors. As discussed in the white paper itself, resilience capacities need to be linked. Local strategies, networks, and support to learners adversely affected by a crisis must be linked and supported by institutional and structural approaches enable reinforce and enable such actions to continue. Finally, and as stressed in the white paper, staff members must reinforce the idea that resilience is a process rather than an outcome. With this understanding, resilience pathways in the education sector will shift over time as the crisis evolves; therefore, programs must be planned and managed in a way that enables such flexibility.	As part of tracking and assessing the impact of prior resilience-focused investments, it is important to understand successes, barriers, and challenges to specific capacities being deployed over time and in various sub-national contexts, particularly in the midst of a crisis. Based on learning from this work, Missions should give specific attention to addressing identified barriers/bottlenecks to the effective deployment of such capacities.

Key finding: During the acute phase of COVID-19-related disruptions, many responses were absorptive in nature, but with potential to learn and build on them to make them more adaptive and transformative solutions for endemic educational challenges within national systems.	
Recommendation or implication for the USAID Center for Education and USAID Bureaus	**Recommendation or implication for USAID Missions and partners in-country (including ministries of education and higher education)**
Continue to capture, document, and institutionalize learning from the experiences of COVID-19 response (and other shocks/stressors), to feed into future crisis response planning or policy at an Agency level.	Use information and data collected on positive deviances to understand how and why specific communities, populations, or systems were able to maintain well-being and learning outcomes in the midst of the pandemic. Use this as a springboard for identifying how such mechanisms could be better supported within national priorities and planning on a long-term horizon. As part of a focus on adaptive management practice within Missions, recalibrate action accordingly. Identify which adaptations and shifts made in response to school closures and disruption might hold promise for improving overall well-being and learning outcomes beyond the crisis. For example, consider whether distance learning modalities are an approach that might be further institutionalized and supported as part of meeting/reaching educational sector priorities and goals. Similarly, where networks and alliances have been able to ensure bottom-up accountability, appropriate support, and localized responses, consideration should be given to how these might become a more permanent fixture in the educational landscape, either through targeted investments or ensuring meaningful participation in longer-term planning decisions.

Key finding: A diversity of actors and approaches across the education system—as well as redundancy and multiple entry points to address specific challenges—support resilience of the education system as a whole.	
Recommendation or implication for the USAID Center for Education and USAID Bureaus	**Recommendation or implication for USAID Missions and partners in-country (including ministries of education and higher education)**
In alignment with the United Nations New Way of Working, ensure that future education policies and strategies emphasize the importance of working in partnership with local civil society and non-government partners alongside strategic investments with government and systems-strengthening. Institutional investments by USAID in ministries of education priorities and strategies need to be coupled with investments in sub-national and localized units of actions to ensure in current and future crises there is both bottom-up accountability and appropriate support for decentralized structures, systems, and decision-making.	Use the convening power of USAID in-country to bring diverse perspectives and views to the table when considering appropriate responses to COVID-19-related vulnerabilities. Investments should be made in localized networks, organizations, and structures whose actions during COVID-19 ensured that marginalized learners' needs were adequately addressed through Ministry-led responses. Such investments need to be strategically targeted in the long-term at ensuring that these actions are perceived by all stakeholders involved as being complementary to, rather than in competition with, ministry-led responses and priorities.

Key finding: Building resilience is a long-term, cross-sectoral, and context-specific process.	
Recommendation or implication for the USAID Center for Education and USAID Bureaus	**Recommendation or implication for USAID Missions and partners in-country (including ministries of education and higher education)**
Consider how to conceptualize the "macro" vulnerabilities and vulnerability pathways that are not presently elaborated on in the resilience framework (i.e., how to talk about structural constraints like economic systems and political considerations like corruption), and how they intersect with resilience building in the education sector. Leverage flexibility afforded through the Agency's 2018 Education Policy to work with other sectors, particularly when such investments have the capacity to mutually reinforce outcomes of interest across multiple sectors.	Missions need to recognize that investments in the education system extend beyond education sector actors, partners, and institutions. The strengthening of social protection, health, livelihoods, and governance sectors can have important, positive impacts on resilience outcomes for the education system, and, similarly, investments in the education sector can support these other systems. This recognition should enable greater cross-sector collaboration and engagement. Using the resilience "chapeau" and, particularly, the collective goal of maintaining and improving well-being in the midst of a crisis (with sector-specific definitions of what this means for various areas of work), might afford greater opportunity to program and plan in ways that are long-term and systems-oriented.

Key finding: COVID-19 helps us understand the relationship between education system resilience and wider societal resilience. In the coming years—as countries and the global economy work toward recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic—this relationship will (and should) be further emphasized.	
Recommendation or implication for the USAID Center for Education and USAID Bureaus	**Recommendation or implication for USAID missions and partners in-country (including ministries of education and higher education)**
Continue to track how return to learning processes are mediated by and influence issues like overall trust in government and the role localized education systems and actors play in mediating and communicating community-level concerns and government interests. Reinforce in future Agency guidance and policy the critical role education plays in times of crisis in strengthening social capital, and hence, the significant importance education as a sector has in the Agency's wider governance/democratization reforms and priorities.	Ensure that as part of programming and strategy that has as an ambition to strengthen institutional governance and public trust education is given prominence (and investment). Specifically, mechanisms that support bottom-up accountability and the voices of local education stakeholders (parents, community leaders, educators) may be important to wider institutional development approaches and strategies (in education and other sectors).

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: REFERENCES

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APPENDIX B: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
1. Planned Process for RtL: What was the process by which countries planned for/are planning for the return to learning during COVID-19?	a. What policies and plans exist or were developed to support the return to learning? b. What were key triggers/decision points when planning the return to learning, and what factors contributed to the decisions made? c. Who was involved in decision-making, and how were decisions made about the return to learning across the education continuum (pre-primary, primary, secondary, tertiary, non-formal, technical training)? What were the explicit (and implicit) priorities? d. Were the decision-making processes harmonious across different stakeholders?
2. Actual Process for RtL: What was/is the actual process by which countries returned/are returning to learning (from an implementation perspective) during COVID-19?	a. How did countries reach and retain marginalized populations; adapt the academic calendar; adapt instructional time, curricula, and learning supports (including integrating distance learning); modify exams and learner promotion practices; and re-engage educators and prepare infrastructure? b. What were the key challenges and opportunities that emerged to ensuring a safe, equitable, and inclusive return to learning, especially regarding (but not limited to) safety and well-being; communication, consultation, collaboration; monitoring, evaluating, and learning; and policy and funding? c. Which learners became (further) marginalized by the actual return to learning process? d. What strategies were common across contexts; which strategies had particular relevance to specific countries? What contextual, political, or other factors seem to explain the differences between planned and actual RtL processes? e. How were strategies changed or adapted in response to contextual factors (e.g., insecurity, rising COVID-19 tests, political transitions, natural hazards)?
3. Appreciating Shock/Stress Context for RtL: What are the ways in which COVID-19 intersects with ongoing shocks and stressors in context and do these additional shocks/stressors affect some populations more than others (i.e., are certain populations/ demographics/ locations more vulnerable due to additional shocks/stressors)?	a. How has this been identified and tracked through the return to learning period? b. How are response efforts recognizing and responding to the differential impacts of the pandemic on communities, educators/school personnel, and learners, and targeting action accordingly?
4. Identifying Pockets of Promise in RtL: How are educational decision makers seeking to identify not only problems/issues with the COVID-19 response, but also where things went well and	a. This may include investigation of: – *Local level autonomy vs. the need for centralized decision-making support* – *Communication between teachers and parents* – *Capacity of educators and policymakers to adapt quickly and nimbly; the functionality/local leadership of coordination mechanisms*

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
seeking to build off of these pockets of promise?	– *Focus and attention on student well-being, pre-existing contingency plans and structure, etc.* – *Role of non-state actors and potentially the private sector or civil society in supporting educational continuity* – *Coherence between education actors and health, humanitarian, protection, social protection or other actors* – *The extent to which these pockets of promise are absorptive/adaptive vs. potentially transformative* b. How can these pockets of promise be built on/strengthened to embed them as common practice in the education system as a whole, particularly from an inclusion/equity standpoint?
5. Outcomes of RtL Process: Retrospectively, according to key stakeholders, what positive and negative intended and unintended consequences were observed as a result of decisions made when planning the return to learning?	a. What were the intended or unintended outcomes of the return to learning process on: – *equitable and inclusive access to education?* – *learners' well-being or ability to cope with adversity?* – *promoting or inhibiting learners' resumption of learning?* – *building resilience of learners, schools, families, communities, and the education system?* b. What do key stakeholders identify as the most important lessons learned from the return-to-learning process?
6. Utility of USAID Frameworks: To what extent are USAID's RtL and resilience and education frameworks useful for conceptualizing, planning, and carrying out the return to learning during and after an education disruption such as COVID-19?	a. How could the frameworks be amended, adapted, or contextualized in light of what has been learned in their application to examining educational responses in a range of country contexts (for example, by specifying in greater detail adaptive, absorptive, transformative capacities, or thinking about exposure and sensitivity to risk)? b. How are the two frameworks related/how do they inform one another? What can we say to the hypothesis that enhanced resilience capacities within entities engaged in the RtL process will enhance the potential that the RtL is equitable, minimizes learning loss, etc.?
7. Perception of Education as a National Priority: How is/has education being/been positioned as a key driver for national COVID-19 response and recovery efforts?	a. How are/have cross-sectoral approaches and perspective affecting/affected this positioning, especially in regard to: – *education as a site for strengthening lines of communication between health officials and communities about the pandemic* – *use of education as a vehicle for workforce upskilling/redeployment* – *balancing public trust in schools' health/safety measures with student demand/need for protection and return to learning and the need for equitable provision of learning (social capital)* – *continuity of education as a part of a social protection strategy, portfolio, or package*

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
	– *coherence of the national COVID-19 public health strategy and the education return to learning strategy (i.e., the prioritization of the education workforce for vaccinations as they become available)*[38]

[38] See: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/immunization/sage/covid/sage-prioritization-roadmap-covid19-vaccines.pdf?Status=Temp&sfvrsn=bf227443_2

APPENDIX C: RETURN TO LEARNING FRAMEWORK PRIORITIES[39]

✓	**(RE)ENGAGE ALL LEARNERS, ESPECIALLY THE MOST MARGINALIZED**
	Conduct rapid assessments (either through existing data or primary data collection) to identify marginalized groups.
	Collaborate with communities to (re)engage all learners.
	Ensure education information and monitoring systems are functioning and capable of tracking (re)enrollment of all learners, especially marginalized populations, in real time.
	Promote alternative pathways back to education.
	Address policy barriers that exclude some learners from returning to education.
✓	**DEVELOP EDUCATION REOPENING PLANS**
	Involve learners, educators, parents, and communities in decision-making.
	Develop an education reopening plan, including safe operations guidance.
	Develop an outbreak response plan at the school-level.
	Communicate clearly and consistently.
	Monitor the situation regularly.
✓	**ADAPT INSTRUCTIONAL TIME, CURRICULA, AND LEARNING SUPPORTS**
	Understand the range of options for helping learners catch up.
	Revise the academic calendar and schedule.
	Adapt (or condense) the curriculum and teaching and learning materials.
	Identify learners' social-emotional, protection, and academic needs.
	Consider where distance learning should continue.
	Mobilize financial and human resources for planning for catch-up programming.
✓	**MODIFY EXAMS AND LEARNER PROMOTION PRACTICES**
	Identify how exams have been affected by the crisis.
	Identify which exams are a priority.
	Develop a learner promotion strategy.
	Communicate with learners, families, and educators.
	Ensure that monitoring systems to track access to exams and pass rates are in place.
	Mobilize resources needed to implement adapted exams.
✓	**RE-ENGAGE EDUCATORS AND PREPARE THE LEARNING SPACE**
	Revisit workforce needs.
	Address educator capacity development needs.
	Develop or revise policy to meet education workforce needs.
	Assess the need for repairs and creation of new learning spaces, additional furniture and materials, disinfection of learning spaces, and signage and floor markings.
	Mobilize financial resources to fill gaps.

[39] Boisvert K. and N. Weisenhorn, 2020

APPENDIX D: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS DEVELOPED AT INCEPTION

Figure 1. Pathways of resilience and vulnerability during COVID-19

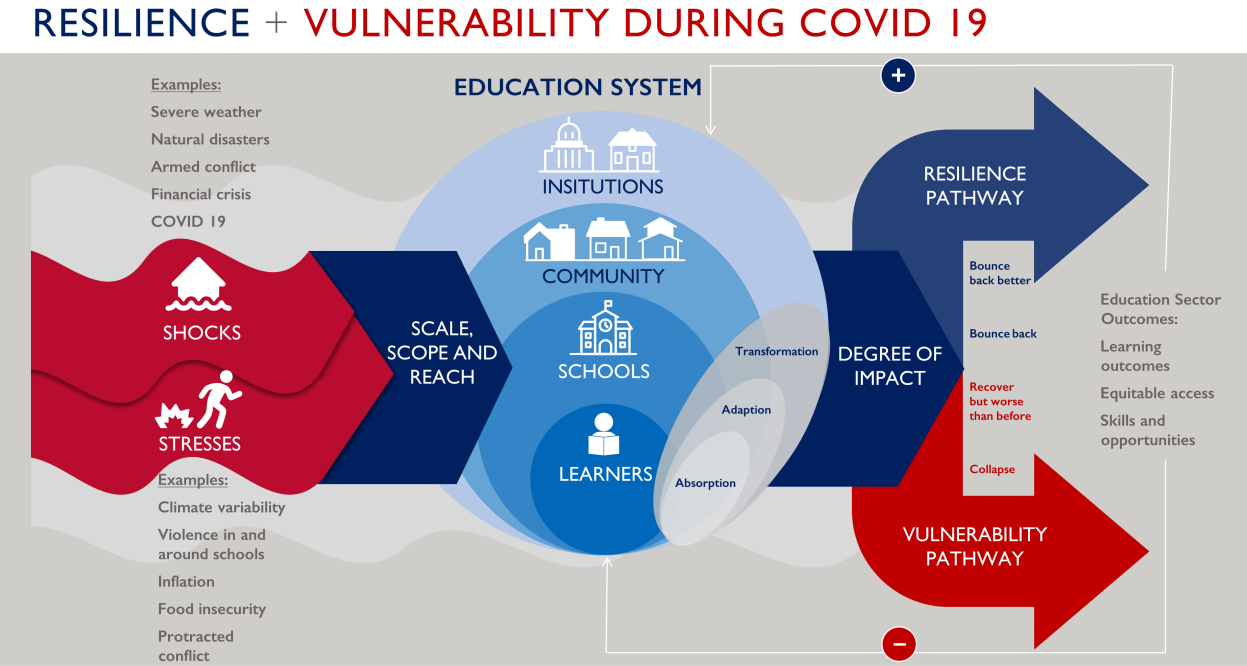

Figure 2. Mapping COVID-19-specific resilience capacities

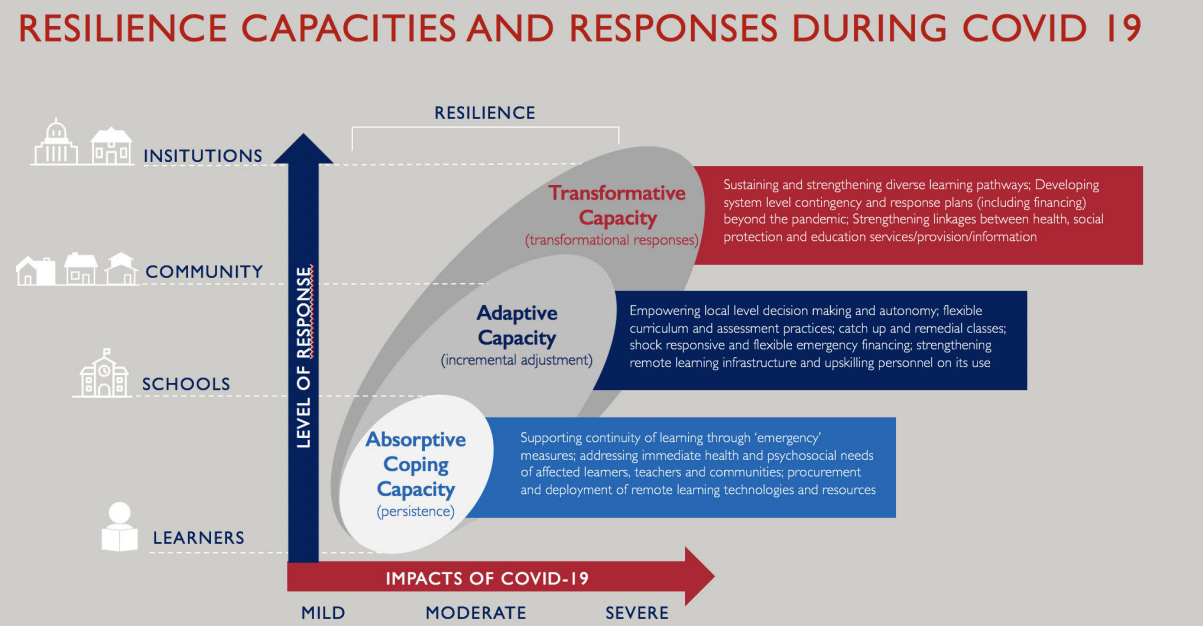

Figure 3. The Education-Resilience Relationship