

Key Messages: What children and young people want you to know when preparing for the next outbreak

In preparing for future infectious diseases outbreaks, children need to be at the centre. As children and young people from Colombia, Nicaragua, Democratic Republic of Congo and Lebanon, here are some of our recommendations.

KEY MESSAGES FOR GOVERNMENTS, NATIONAL, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Creating an enabling environment where children and families can thrive:

- Children endured challenges during COVID-19 school closures, and many did not return when schools reopened. Children – particularly refugee and internally displaced children, children with disabilities, children who confronted sexual and gender-based violence, children recruited by armed groups, children were forced into early marriage, children orphaned by COVID-19 and other economically impoverished children – need social, emotional, and mental strengthening and support to return to school and to catch up on lost learning. 🏫
- A child's place is at school and at home, NOT in war. Strengthen measures to protect children from being recruited by armed groups and support children to safely exit and return to school. Create safe spaces to listen to children leaving armed groups, including girls who became pregnant, and provide psychosocial support, dialogue, and skills training. ☂
- Support girls who were married and/or pregnant during the pandemic, to strengthen their psychosocial well-being and to ensure their access to education, housing, and vocational training. It is wrong to side-line, dismiss and abuse girls who become pregnant. Ensure that education leaders accept pregnant girls in school and reject discrimination and blame against pregnant girls in society. ☂
- Provide income-generation and employment opportunities for low-income parents. 💰
- Ensure that children are not involved in hazardous child labour and are able to attend school. Raise awareness among parents and communities about the suffering of children who do dangerous jobs (mining, bars, hotels, military, etc.). 🗣

Decision-making around closing schools:

- Schools must NOT be closed. There are ways to keep schools open and safe during infectious disease outbreaks. For example, by limiting class sizes, adding more classrooms, providing clean water and soap, and adapting technologically and socially. 🏫
- Children must be meaningfully involved in making decisions around school closures. 🏫

Reducing education and social inequality gaps:

- Advocate for increased funding for education in national budgets. ⚖️
- Produce educational materials that do not require technology and are available for free. Many children live where there is a lack of radio, internet, electricity, and roads. Where feasible, invest in new technology such as tablets and laptops with adequate internet and radio connection to improve accessibility and continuity of education. ⚖️
- Create supportive and enabling learning environments for children with disabilities, for example, through empowering parents and caregivers as education providers at home and through developing facilities for them at schools. ⚖️
- Identify marginalized children who are out-of-school and ensure that they receive education too. ⚖️

KEY MESSAGES FOR FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES

Create an enabling environment where we can thrive and learn:

- Strengthen the culture of care for children. Use strategies that are not based on punishment, but instead create safe, dynamic, and healthy environments for children in the home and in the community. (schools and communities) 🧑🏻🧑🏻🧑🏻
- Provide learning spaces in communal areas where communities can safely come together to support children in their education. (schools and communities) 🧑🏻🧑🏻🧑🏻
- Provide opportunities for parents and caregivers to support their children's learning, for example, by allowing parents to attend class sessions with their children. (schools and communities) 🧑🏻🧑🏻🧑🏻
- Always consider what is best for children and respect children's rights. (families, schools and communities) 🧑🏻🧑🏻🧑🏻



Actions: Examples of what we have done to take care of ourselves and others during, and because of, school closures

- During COVID-19 school closures:
 - We followed public health guidelines and protected our families by staying at home, wearing masks, social distancing and getting vaccinations. We encouraged other children in our communities to do the same.
 - We helped our low-income parents with income-generating work. We will continue to do this as long as we can still go to school and do our homework.
 - We taught and assisted our younger siblings.
 - We faced educational difficulties, but we learned to be self-directed and made use of the internet.
- Due to our experiences during COVID-19, we are more aware of the need for self-care and want to increase our knowledge of mental health in our daily lives. It is also important to accompany people with mental health problems, especially anxiety and depression.
- We support out-of-school children by sharing with them our curriculum and encouraging them to return to school.
- We share our experiences and reflections on COVID-19 school closures to advocate for the meaningful engagement of children in government decisions around school closures during outbreaks – for us and future generations.
- We, as children, support one another. During school closures, when someone is facing difficulties, we try to visit them, communicate with them, and see if they need anything. This is how we support each other as friends.
- We support children who were recruited by armed groups to reintegrate with their families and return to school.
- We support girls who were married and/or pregnant during the pandemic to access psychosocial support, housing, school or vocational training (i.e. sewing, braiding hair).

Decision-makers, leaders, and humanitarian actors, what are YOU going to do? How does this fit (or not) within your own work strategies?

