

UNICEF Education & COVID-19 Case Study

Sri Lanka – Integrated school reopening

30 April 2021

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On 13 March 2020 all schools closed due to COVID-19, affecting 4.2 million primary and secondary students and 578,000 preschool children across Sri Lanka. Although it has had to face serial school closures and reopenings, it was the first country in South Asia to reopen its schools fully in August 2020 (for the first time). This case study examines the integrated approach that underpinned this success; namely, a joined-up approach involving education, health, water and sanitation, nutrition, child protection, communication, advocacy and community engagement.

RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

During the lockdown when schools were closed, UNICEF, with the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education, developed print-based learning materials for grade 1 and 2 students in local languages and distributed them to approximately 665,000 students in all schools.

To prepare for their reopening, UNICEF collaborated with the Ministry of Education and the Children's Secretariat to develop and distribute Infection, Prevention and Control Guidelines to all 19,000 preschools and more than 10,000 schools, benefitting more than 4.7 million children. The collaboration also covered the procurement of hand washing stations and supplies, including soaps, disinfectants, and hand sanitizers for 2,375 schools and 4,446 preschools, with a special focus on high-risk areas.

In addition, UNICEF worked with the Ministries of Education and Health to roll out the national 'Back-to-school' communication campaign, COVID-19: New Lessons for the New Term. Communications materials were in local languages and included video clips and audio spots broadcast on national TV and radio, posters for all 10,000 schools island-wide to reach all learners, and signboards for 410 schools with student populations over 500 students, as well as child friendly comic books for all 9,161 primary schools. It is estimated that the campaign reached all of Sri Lanka's 4.7 million school-going children.

Advocacy was another element. UNICEF prepared a [brief](#) for the 2021 national budget planning process that called attention to the urgent need to finance continuous learning and remedial education programmes to help children catch up on lost learning, as well as longer-term investments in blended learning, including the preparation of teachers and parents. These key messages were echoed in media pieces, such as this [Op-ed](#). UNICEF also developed the education chapter of the [UN Advisory Paper: Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19 in Sri Lanka](#). These efforts, combined with those of other partners, helped ensure that reopening was at the centre of public debate. UNICEF's advocacy with the government resulted in child protection services being considered as an essential service during the lockdown period, with all movement restrictions lifted for child protection officers. UNICEF supported the government and civil society organizations on the provision of psychosocial support services, both virtually (1,929 via helpline) and in-person. This enabled UNICEF and partners to reach over 3,517 children and 2,299 parents and primary caregivers across the country who required mental health and psychosocial support.

In addition, between April and September 2020, the Government and the World Food Programme distributed food packages to replace missed school lunches. The school meal programme has resumed as of January 2021.

Health staff from districts that were not high risk further promoted children's health by working with school health clubs. Medical Officers of Health undertook school health inspections, including school-based immunizations when schools reopened. Moreover, the country's workforce of public health midwives expanded their work to include adolescents in their catchment areas, providing advice on how to access specific health services during the pandemic.

Key lessons include the critical importance of:

- a **coordinated response**, including among all relevant line ministries
- **engagement of the full school community**, including parents, students, alumni, school managers and community members in the reopening communications campaign. They proactively contributed to preventing the spread of the illness, disinfection of classrooms and monitoring. Engaging families raised awareness about infection prevention generally, stressing the need for sustained and ongoing efforts both inside and outside schools
- **an evaluation of the COVID-19 response**, including an analysis of the quality of distance learning materials and gaps in monitoring and data collection systems – work that has begun with support from UNICEF.

NEXT STEPS

Currently, UNICEF is working with the Ministry of Education on learning recovery, including the use of formative assessments, differentiated pedagogy and an adjusted curriculum to minimize learning losses and reduce disparities among students who, as this [video clip](#) shows, are relieved to be back in school. Additionally, UNICEF is preparing teachers to be able to provide psychosocial support to children nationwide.

Cost effectiveness: UNICEF's investment in the country's COVID-19 response is approximately US \$808,000 to date, including valued contributions from the Global Partnership for Education, Education Thematic Funds, as well as resources from the Governments of the United States, Japan, Korea and the UK. The reach was national, benefitting all 4.7 million students.

OTHER RESOURCES

For other resources, including more education and COVID-19 case studies, please click [here](#) and filter by "Area of Work" (Education).

For more information, please contact:

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