

Position Paper

The Impact of COVID-19 on Child Labor in Jordan

February 2021

1. Introduction

Child labor has been a visible and concerning phenomenon in Jordan for many years. This is due to several factors, including regional political instability, poor socioeconomic backgrounds, great numbers of populations living just below the poverty line, low parental education and literacy levels, and a general lack of awareness about the dangers of child labor¹.

Jordan, alongside Lebanon, is one of the countries in the Middle East which has received a great number of migrants, most of which are refugees fleeing the dangers of their home countries. In 2017, there were approximately 2,100,000 Palestinians, 1,200,000 Syrians, and approximately 315,000 registered migrant workers², not including the thousands that are undocumented. These high rates of non-Jordanians have vulnerable legal statuses and face multiple barriers to accessing both the labor workforce and decent quality education.

According to the latest statistics in the 2016 National Child Labor Survey, approximately 75,982 children aged between 5-17 were engaged in child labor, of which 60,787 (80%) are Jordanian, 11,098 (14.6%) are Syrian, and 4,096 are of other nationalities³. Of these 70,000, an approximate 45,000 were stated to have been engaged in the worst forms of child labor, which, according to the ILO Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor, is defined as “work which, by its nature of the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.”

The survey shows that the largest sectors with Jordanian child laborers include car mechanics, cleaning, metalwork, carpentry, and sewing. As for Syrian child laborers, they were predominantly in agriculture (43.2%), services (42.6%) and industry (14.2%)⁴. According to the Labow Law, Jordanians above 16 years old are granted the ability to join the labor market within specific restrictions, yet still they are often found to be working in environments that are dangerous and illegal. As for non-

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Supported by:



1 http://www.nchr.org.jo/Admin_Site/Files/PDF/637c5cd7-e016-4bbb-b2c7-3c31852c8452.pdf

2 Migrant Domestic and Garment Workers in Jordan, 2017. ILO.

3 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_510520.pdf

4 https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2019/Jordan.pdf

Jordanians, it is against the law for any child below the age of 18 to be working, let alone working in hazardous sectors.

According to the US Department of Labor's yearly report of the Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor in Jordan⁵, many children in Jordan continued to engage in worst forms of child labor, including street work or begging, up until 2019. The main reason driving children to engage in child labor is the poverty faced by their families, which often constitute uneducated parents and a minimum of three to four children. These families find themselves struggling between their legal status (for refugees and migrants), which does not entitle them to work, and their inability to pay for basic necessities, including rent and food.

With the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, many families already living in destitution were pushed further to their limits. With no financial support and a previous reliance on day-to-day wages, the pandemic lockdown caused a severe decrease in household incomes and therefore an urge to pull children out of schools and send them into the labor market in order to ensure survival.

The COVID-19 outbreak caused a catastrophic income loss and many layoffs as both employers and employees struggled to remain financially secure. The consequences of the economic crisis took its toll primarily on those working in the informal sectors: individuals already in vulnerable positions with no legal entitlement to work, no social protection, no access to health services, and in exploitative situations that render them susceptible to human trafficking and forced labor⁶.

Furthermore, the temporary disruption of education has caused several challenges and dangers. Firstly, children find themselves unoccupied at home and therefore more likely to be targeted by traffickers who might promise them decent work or

⁵ https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2019/Jordan.pdf

⁶ <https://cutt.ly/zxgm9j4>

education. Secondly, for families with children already previously enrolled in schools, the shift to online schooling has caused general neglect in education as attendance is not monitored. Both of these encourage children to abandon education and move towards more urgent requirements, namely, helping the family provide an income in financially insecure times.

While the government has previously taken some measures to limit the phenomenon of child labor, no urgent measures or schemes were undertaken during the pandemic to immediately relieve poor families, and its insufficient resources continue to disallow for effective regulation of child labor and its compliance with child labor laws.



2. The relationship between education and child labor

The relationship between education and child labor is a complex one, with both impacting the role and significance of the other. Historically, the lack of accessible, affordable and good quality schooling has always been a key factor in encouraging children to enter the workforce. However, the reverse is also true, and enrollment in schooling can urge children to enter the workforce in order to be able to pay the direct and indirect costs of schooling for themselves or members of the family. Some children enter the workforce as a result of poor schooling or dropping out; others enter the workforce as a result of finding the curriculum dull, irrelevant, or unable to equip them with the direct skills required to sustain a living.

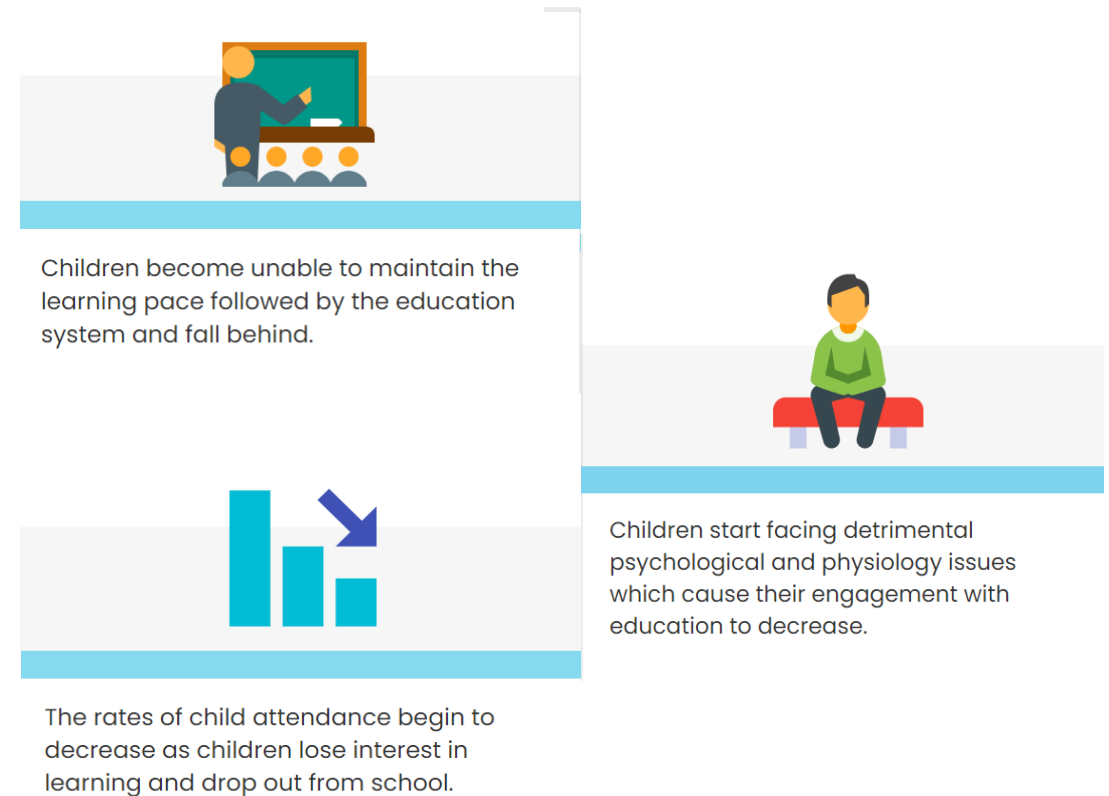
According to a report conducted by UNICEF in December 2020, the number of out-of-school children in Jordan is 112,016, out of which 50,642 are Syrian, 39,838 are Jordanian, and 21,536 are of other nationalities⁷. The report claims that the likelihood of Syrian children dropping out before finishing Grade 6 is higher than that of Jordanian children. This is due to several factors, primarily the restrictions in labor market policies that prevent Syrians from working in specific sectors and jobs, and which therefore create a low value of return from education for them. Other factors include economic barriers; the indirect costs of education; enrollment barriers as a result of not having documentation; child marriage, in the case of young girls; and cultural discrimination or bullying among schoolmates.

According to a survey conducted by the Human Rights Watch during the school year 2017-2018 which included 18,000 registered Syrian refugee children, only 15% of 16-year-olds and 21% of 17-year-olds were enrolled in secondary school, in contrast to approximately 80% of Jordanian children in those age ranges⁸. This is because it is considerably more challenging to keep children in school, despite ensuring they are enrolled at the primary level. That is, statistics show that many children who do get enrolled at the primary school level often end up dropping out by the time they reach secondary school.

7 <https://www.unicef.org/jordan/media/4886/file/Out%20of%20School%20Children%20Study%20.pdf>
8 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/06/26/i-want-continue-study/barriers-secondary-education-syrian-refugee-children-jordan#>

Studies show that there is a negative correlation between the levels of economic participation of children aged 7-14 years and the youth literacy rates of children aged 15-24 years⁹, which means that children who are likely to engage in child labor during their younger years will face significant challenges during their later years trying to meet the literacy requirements for their age level. Indeed, many children in Jordan already struggle with learning the basics, with 53% of ten-year-olds unable to read a text that is appropriate for their level of education.

RISKS OF CHILD LABOR ENGAGEMENT AT AN EARLY AGE



Engagement with child labor at an early age, therefore, poses the risks of: first, children being unable to keep up with the learning pace required for their age and education level, which are worsened by the psychological and health detriments of labor itself;

9 <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/child-labor-hinders-childrens-education#:~:text=The%20findings%20outlined%20in%20the,child%20labor%20on%20school%20attendance.&text=For%20children%20who%20manage%20to,performance%20at%20school%20often%20suffers.>

and second, an eventual drop out from the education system due to their inability to access alternative systems that meet their needs and requirements or due to various sociocultural pressures and exploitation (such as early marriage, susceptible among young Syrian women).

Jordan has provided an alternative to such students by introducing non-formal and informal education pathways. Non-formal education (NFE) provides students to teacher-student groups via WhatsApp and Facebook and is monitored by the Ministry of Education, whereas informal education targets alternative learning and psychosocial support. While these have been beneficial, they are only reaching a small fraction of secondary-school Jordanian and Syrian children, and therefore still struggle to meet their goal at reinstating dropped out children into the formal education system.

3. COVID-19's Impact on Education

On 15 March 2020, the government closed all schools, universities, and kindergartens, impacting approximately 2.3 million learners in Jordan. This brought to the forefront inequalities that had previously been overshadowed, such as learning inequality and potential drop out as a result of various families and children having unequal access to education. The groups most impacted by such inequality are poor children, refugees, children living in informal settlements, and children with disabilities.



Since the beginning of the pandemic, Tamkeen's community facilitators have been conducting fieldwork in various areas in Jordan, primarily in the center and north. The fieldwork consisted of awareness sessions, focus group discussions, and phone calls, all of which were continuing to take place online during the forced lockdown. The data gathered from the fieldwork shed light on the impact of COVID-19 on children and their families, their experience with the shift to distanced learning, and the effect this had on the rising levels of child labor in Jordan. These findings are outlined below.

The inefficacy of distanced learning

The shift to distanced learning has created many challenges to both students and teachers alike, in terms of their capacity to deliver and receive knowledge in a way that is effective and motivating. The nature of distanced learning is that it requires a particular kind of environment whereby the student is capable of having self-discipline in order to get through the material on their own.



Many students, however, especially procrastinators or those who are easily distracted with no parents at home to monitor them, find themselves cramming assignments to the last minute and studying for exams in a rushed manner. This is not an ideal way to learn, and demotivates students from engaging with the material in a meaningful way.

One of the children's parents said: "my son, who is in the first grade, doesn't understand anything, and isn't benefiting at all from this learning. Besides that, it is difficult to control him and make sure he stays sitting by the laptop or tablet."

Another stated: "if the lesson is 10 minutes, what is the child meant to learn? They destroyed the children and their parents through online learning. The brothers started fighting with each other, so I found that the best thing was to send one of them to the carpentry with his father. From it he can learn something useful for the future, and I can get rid of the chaos at home."

Crowded home environments are another deterrent to the effective reception of online schooling. Since most families often have several children and limited space at home, the ability to concentrate is made much more difficult, and pressure rises on the parents to subdue their children into paying attention. This causes them to lose interest and search for alternatives that are more useful for their future, often going out to work and entering the labor market.

One child said: "this is not online learning. This is not learning. We work to fill our free time because this type of education is not useful." Another claimed: "online learning is useless. What am I going to do with education? It is better for me to work and buy food for my family."

The lack of electronic equipment, internet, or technical knowledge for navigating online platforms and lessons

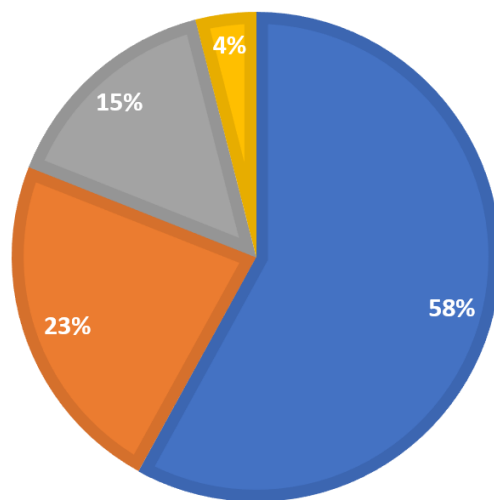
On 22 March 2020, the Ministry of Education announced the launch of Darsak, an online education platform which was created to showcase televised lessons for children in grades 1-12. Later in April, several systems were set up to help teachers track school attendance and online assessments, as well as to provide necessary training for teachers to help navigate the new platforms.

Unfortunately, however, not all children were able to access these platforms due to the lack of internet data, electronic devices, or connectivity required. According to an assessment conducted by UNICEF in April 2020, approximately 23% of households in Jordan did not have internet access, and the majority of the rest had limited data¹⁰.

Indeed, this was noticed by Darsak, who stated that only 70% of the students have access to their services, meaning there are over 400,000 children unable to access online schooling and thus placed at a disadvantage¹¹.

INTERNET ACCESS AT HOME

■ Limited Data ■ No Internet ■ Wifi Connection ■ Unlimited Data



Prior to COVID-19, around one-third of students in Jordan did not have a computer at home for schoolwork, according to World Bank reports. With the coming of the pandemic, the Ministry of Education began providing free tablets, smartphones, and laptops to families in dire needs, which helped in alleviating their situation and overcoming learning obstacles. Many, however, remain disadvantaged due to having multiple children who all require access to electronic devices.

This, often, creates the urge and encourages the engagement of children in child labor, in order to pay for electronic devices to access their lessons. As one parent explained, “my son is 15 years old and he troubles me a lot, and he began working with his father’s friend, who is an electrician, in order to secure the price of a phone through which he can study and entertain himself.”

Others lack the technical skills required to navigate the platforms, Darsak and Noorspace, and found that it added difficulty to accessing lessons online. Such complaints were noted multiple times during the community facilitators’ field visits and conversations with parents and children. One parent said: “we stopped using the platforms because we don’t understand a thing about them, nor do our children. They barely understand their lessons in schools” and then added “I sent my son to work until regular schooling is back; he can learn a vocation until schools begin again.”

Another mother stated that: “pre-COVID, I had a home-based nursery and I used to cook for ladies, especially the ones who I babysit for. I was able to handle things on my own and provide for my kid’s needs. Soon, my kids started to lose interest in school, especially that I can’t provide internet or devices for them all the time. They had to join the labor force in order to provide food. They work in coffee shops, vegetable markets, or anything they can find. I am very miserable; I feel like my children lost their opportunity to learn.”

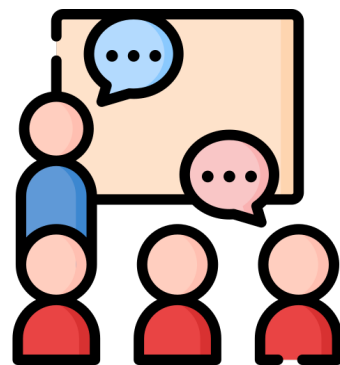


10 <https://inee.org/system/files/resources/0.pdf>

11 <https://en.royanews.tv/news/23612/Child-labor-on-the-rise-in-Jordan--Jordanian-Labor-Observatory>

The physical separation of the student from the child

The lack of in-person interaction between students and their teachers has also been particularly challenging. As was found in the fieldwork data, despite the availability of alternative platforms, such as Zoom, Skype or IMO, students and parents have been finding that the absence of the physicality of a teacher has caused confusion and the inability to ask questions and receive feedback for their efforts.



The environment required to stimulate engagement and curiosity was lacking, as parents found that they could not replace the charisma and motivation provided by teachers. One parent stated that: *“I don’t have the teacher’s attitude for teaching. The teacher is usually prepared and familiar with the curriculum, and she has a certain charisma which means the children listen to her and stay focused, which is totally unlike mothers, especially with teenage children.”*

Some parents found that the pressure placed on them to monitor, guide, and help teach their children required much effort which they sometimes lacked the energy for, particularly those with daytime jobs. As one mother said: *“I come back from work too tired and unable to monitor or help my children focus on their studies.”*

One child admitted that *“I just wish to go back to school and learn from my teacher face to face. I don’t understand anything from online learning.”*

Indeed, it remains one of online education’s major challenges to keep students engaged and maintain a positive outlook on education and its benefits. According to UN Volunteers, prior to the pandemic, student enrollment and retention rates were the lowest among refugee students, and have in worst cases decreased to 20%¹².

The low standards of success

Due to teachers’ inability to effectively monitor their students and their progress through online platforms, the passing grade and success rate of children has rapidly increased as a result of easier examinations and children utilizing help from family and friends during exams. Assignments were being designed in order to be graded easily

and to accommodate the number of students online, instead of targeting the needs of the students and providing in depth engagement. As a result, students were losing interest in the material, not watching the videos, and resorting to cheating during their exams.

One of the parents who attended Tamkeen’s awareness raising sessions stated that: *“my kids never study. I do their tests on Darsak so they could pass the year. They are always playing PUBG, I wish they find a job instead of playing the whole time.”*



Another parent said: *“my children were very committed in following up with their lessons through the platform, but when they saw their friends passing by cheating, they felt very bad. Now they hate education and I feel like I can’t blame them.”*

Additionally, students were not provided with rigid structures alongside their assignments and exams. As teachers were uploading exams in the evening, there was no specific time allocated to watch lesson videos, which, while provides children with the freedom to choose, also opens up the possibilities of their engagement with child labor in the mornings.

Some children have also considered distanced learning to be an extension of their holiday, attending their exams but not taking the educational element with the seriousness it requires. This lack of formality to education and learning caused many to lose faith in its importance and necessity for their future.

Ramy, who used to attend school regularly and with discipline, said: *“there is no school now, I go and pick scrap up in order to sell it.”*

12 <https://www.unv.org/Success-stories/new-school-mitigating-COVID-19-impacts-vulnerable-children-Jordan>

4. COVID-19's Impact on Child Labor

Based on a report released jointly by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education, the total number of out-of-school children in Jordan between the ages of 6-11 years has remained steady since 2014¹³. Following the pandemic, however, there are concerns that this number will drop for the first time in 8 years as families begin to face an unprecedented shock to their financial stability and security.

Jordan continues to face economic and social challenges in its attempts to provide for its large refugee population and families living below the poverty line, and its labor market is struggling to meet the demands of a growing population. Following COVID-19, efforts were made at expanding the social protection system to prevent growing inequality, but the National Aid Fund for Jordanian citizens and UN-provided food and cash assistance was insufficient to cover those in need.

01

Children already working

Children were already engaged in child labor prior to the emergence of COVID-19, and found the shift to online learning an opportunity to extend their working hours.

02

Children newly introduced to work

Some children were not previously engaged in child labor, but found themselves forced by extreme financial insecurity or the lack of engagement with online schooling.

Many families and children have thus resorted to child labor and working in the informal economy in order to fend for themselves. According to the data collected and observed by Tamkeen's community facilitators, two categories of working children were encountered:

1. Those that worked in after-school hours and on weekends prior to the pandemic, who now work all day due to not attending online classes;

2. Those that never worked prior to the pandemic, and who have now turned to work as a way of filling their time and excuse for leaving the house.

The first group of children were balancing between work and study even prior to the pandemic, but have shifted towards full-time jobs in the morning and studying minimally during the night. Some do not even study at all, and have considered distanced learning to be a form of holiday. The second group of children, however, are those whose families have faced significant destitution as a result of the economic crisis and have therefore abandoned the child's need for education in order to meet their more direct urgent needs.



Tamkeen's community facilitators noted a particular change in children's perspectives regarding child labor. Prior to COVID-19, some children felt ashamed of having to work, or at least maintained their efforts to continue studying alongside work; now, however, children feel a sense of pride and accomplishment in being of aid to a declining household, and of taking on the roles of primary breadwinners, especially given that their parents are not legally entitled to work.

One child stated: "it isn't shameful to work, it is shameful to beg... My father's economic circumstances are very difficult. I dropped out because online education is useless, so now I work in a hardware store." *While this was the case of many children, others were aware that their work was illegal as they were below the legal working age, but said that they have to work to help their families. One child said: "I'm not young. I'm 16 years old. There is nothing wrong with me working to support my family."*

The Islamic Charity Center Society (ICCS), a center which provided social services, education and online classes to students during the pandemic, stated to a community facilitator that many students stopped attending their classes, particularly males, who began entering the labor market. ICCS stated that parents and care-givers weren't able to provide for online education necessities, which motivated students to work in order to provide for their school essentials. Over and above, most Syrian students used to work after school, but now with online education began working full-time and studying at night.

This increase in child labor as a result of the pandemic will cause a direct effect in children's wellbeing and livelihoods, where their social, psychological and physiological

development as individuals will be hindered and in danger. Child labor, particularly that in hazardous sectors, exposes children to dangers, illness, and injury, with potentially life lasting impacts. Other effects are less visible, such as the psychological exploitation and relationship between employers and children, which often includes verbal abuse, inappropriate language, and forceful treatment.

Furthermore, it is feared that once a child enters the labor market, it becomes significantly more challenging to reinstate them into the formal education system, as hazardous labor and begging become habitual practices and self-deemed occupations. Indeed, the increase in child labor is one of the primary reasons behind the consequential decrease in school attendance and enrollment rates, despite the availability of alternatives such as non-formal and informal education.

There are several bodies in Jordan responsible for minimizing child labor, including: The Ministry of Labor, especially the Inspection Department; the Public Security Directorate; the Joint Anti-Human Trafficking Unit of the Ministry of Labor and Public Security Directorate; and the Child Labor Units. All actors play a role in enforcing child labor laws, the Penal Code, and monitoring violations related to child labor and human trafficking.

The following laws are in place to minimize child labor and maximize education: Minimum Age for Work and Hazardous Work in Articles 73 and 74 respectively in the Labor Code; the Prohibition of Forced Labor and Prohibition of Child Trafficking in the Law on the Prevention of Human Trafficking; and the laws which enforce compulsory education for all children up to the age of 16 years old in the Education Act and Constitution.

Despite the presence of these laws, it has been difficult to enforce them, particularly during the economically challenging times of COVID-19. This is partly due to the government's limited resources and partly due to the complexity and scale of the problem.



5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically affected people's lives and priorities in Jordan. The number of people struggling for day-to-day life essentials has increased, especially among refugees. Children have suffered from their economic poverty and deprivation, and have thus resorted to entering the labor market to secure themselves and their families.

Tamkeen's community facilitators have conducted fieldwork between March 2020 to January 2021, and have observed the rise in the number of child laborers in formal, informal, and hazardous sectors in Jordan. Children who never felt the need to abandon their education and work were suddenly pushed into precarious situations that urged for them to risk their physical, psychological, and social well-being in order to remain afloat.

While the shift from face-to-face learning to distanced learning was not the key factor, as much as economic instability, it was a contributing factor to children's attitudes towards learning and education as a way of filling their time and strengthening their knowledge for the future of their possibilities. Online education has provided children with the flexibility, freedom, and space to pursue both education and work alongside one another, and in the worst cases, abandon education and pursue work as a full-time occupation.

Traffickers and employers of children will see this as a huge opportunity to use children's vulnerability and need of work to expose them to various violations, including long working hours, physical, verbal, or psychological abuse, and potential injury and illness.

Jordan must take more stringent measures to alleviate destitute families during the pandemic, first and foremost by ensuring that social protection schemes are extended to non-Jordanians. It must also attempt at ensuring that the frameworks for online learning are not causing further inequality and lack of access by those from poorer backgrounds by providing means and lowering the costs required for that access.

Recommendations

1. Begin the immediate and safe return of school students, while allowing parents and children to choose whether they prefer distanced learning or face-to-face learning, and keeping the online platforms as a means of supporting those who choose not to return to schools just yet;
2. Prioritize the return of primary school students as, according to the World Health Organization, infection rates for children below the age of ten are much lower than older ages;
3. Expand social protection benefit schemes to include everyone, especially migrants and refugees;
4. Address the low number of out-of-school children in secondary school who are not being targeted by non-formal education practices;
5. Facilitate psychosocial wellbeing and social/emotional learning to those in vulnerable positions, such as beggars and child laborers;
6. Ensure that internet is made affordable to all, either through payment exemptions or the provision of free internet quotas;
7. Ensure that the Ministry of Labor inspectors have sufficient resources to carry out inspections, especially in the agricultural sector, and ensure that the law is enforced in those sectors;
8. Ensure that investigations are conducted on the worst forms of child labor, including forced begging and sexual exploitation;
9. Publish information about labor law enforcement, such as the number of inspections being conducted periodically and in which sectors, as well as the number of penalties collected for child labor or human trafficking violations.



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