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Home Learning for Children in Low-Income Contexts during a Pandemic: An Analysis of 2020 Survey Results from Syria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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# HOME LEARNING FOR CHILDREN IN LOW-INCOME CONTEXTS DURING A PANDEMIC: AN ANALYSIS OF 2020 SURVEY RESULTS FROM SYRIA AND THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

SU LYN CORCORAN, HELEN PINNOCK, AND RACHEL TWIGG

## ABSTRACT

*COVID-19-related school closures and the need for millions of learners to learn at home created additional pressures for parents and caregivers who were suddenly responsible for their children's education, often with limited support or resources. When schools closed, a flood of home learning materials and activities circulated online, but too few of these solutions focused on the home learning needs of learners with disabilities in low-income contexts, where online learning is rarely an option. The Enabling Education Network and Norwegian Association of Disabled developed guidance materials for all learners that encouraged appropriate, achievable, and low-stress learning activities in easy-to-read and visual formats, which are now available in online and printed formats. These materials were informed by an online survey that captured a snapshot of the extent to which home learning support and resources were provided, and recorded the perspectives of parents, families, and education professionals about learners' situations in 27 countries in the months leading up to July 2020. In this article, we focus on survey responses from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and northern Syria that describe the inclusive home learning provision available. We compared these findings with responses from other countries and identified four key areas of learning that emphasize the importance of localized approaches to inclusive education, drawing on community networks, and positioning teachers and parents as important community resources for education in emergencies.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Enabling Education Network (EENET) is an information network that promotes community-based approaches to inclusive education. It encourages information-sharing among teachers, parents, and decisionmakers in resource-poor environments and amplifies the voices of stakeholders doing innovative work (Corcoran 2020).<sup>1</sup> EENET's activities center on our theory of change and contribute to the overall desire of enabling "more girls, boys, women and men to actively participate in quality, inclusive education and learning opportunities throughout their lives" (Lewis 2016).

As EENET team members, our contributions toward making this change focus on three domains: collaboration, exchange, and influence. For example, the network is partially funded through consultancies, which focus on participation and grassroots voices in inclusive education. What we learn from our consultancy projects connects with our longer term information-sharing aims (Corcoran 2020). EENET consultants from northern and southern contexts collaborate through the network, our consultancies, and informal information-sharing. This helps us identify and address inclusive education gaps and needs, share information between contexts, develop new resources, and work together to influence change in education policy and practice. Our approach to enabling home learning provision, which centers on our theory of change, is based on this foundation.

When COVID-19-related school closures created the need for millions of learners to stay at home, the EENET team began to meet more regularly in order to support each other as we switched to working remotely. We shared and reflected on what we were observing as education systems responded to the pandemic, both in our own contexts and globally. We began to identify problems with how home learning was being interpreted in different settings. First, learning at home was a big change for most learners and their families. Some felt it was an opportunity to try new things and spend more time together, but it was nonetheless stressful for many parents and caregivers, who felt pressured to help their children continue learning, often with limited support or resources (e.g., Richardson 2020; Rigby 2020). Secondly, when schools closed, home learning materials and activities flooded the internet, television, and radio (e.g., News Agency 2020; Lord 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Inclusive education is a constantly evolving process of change and improvement within schools and wider education systems to make education more welcoming and learner friendly. It is about changing education cultures, policies, and practices so they are flexible enough to accommodate any learner (e.g., with or without disabilities; who identifies as a nonconforming gender; is from a different ethnic, language, religious, or financial background; is of any age; or is facing health, migration, refugee, or other vulnerability challenges).

However, these solutions had a limited focus on the home learning needs of learners with disabilities in low-income contexts, where access to television and radio, or to data and other equipment for online learning, is limited. Thirdly, we were concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of the learners, parents, and caregivers in these contexts.

Collaboration is EENET's first domain of change. Inclusive education can only be achieved if individuals and organizations work together and combine their complementary skills, experiences, and resources. For example, parents and communities can play central roles in children's learning before and beyond their formal school careers (Lewis et al. 2019). Collaborative partnerships between families and education professionals are particularly important to children's learning, especially learners with disabilities, who often need their parents to advocate more for their inclusion (e.g., Bailey et al. 2006; Lasater 2016). However, effective partnerships depend on having joint learning opportunities and frequent communication, and all partners must value and share their knowledge and skills with each other equitably and openly (e.g., Chu 2018).

While parents and caregivers are generally interested in children's learning, they can lack confidence in their ability to support this learning or may find that their opinions are not welcomed by educators (Cashman, Bhattacharjea, and Sabates 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic quickly repositioned parents to have primary roles in their children's education (Packman 2020) and provided a unique (if unwanted) opportunity to learn from this new position. In the short term, parents and caregivers needed guidance that would enable them to support their children's home learning. In the long term, the pandemic refocused the importance of developing family-school partnerships between education providers, parents and caregivers, and the local community.

EENET's second domain of change involves helping people to document and exchange "their experiences of developing more inclusive education systems and schools" (Lewis 2016). Learning from each other's experiences enables us to improve our own work. Consequently, as part of a Norwegian consortium program called Together for Inclusion, EENET and Norwegian Association of Disabled (NAD) collaborated to develop easy-to-read and visually appealing home learning guidance materials in printed and online formats. We wanted to prioritize the production of hard-copy materials and worked closely with local distributors to create localized solutions to the challenge of disseminating materials during the period when social distancing was required. To do this, however, we needed to understand the contexts in which the materials would be used.

To inform the development of home learning guidance materials that would be relevant across global contexts, we developed a short online questionnaire that was translated into 14 languages. More than one thousand respondents from 27 countries completed the survey. Corcoran and Pinnock were part of the team that developed the survey. The former is an academic research advisor, the latter an EENET consultant working on joint projects with NAD. They worked with Twigg, a research intern from Manchester Metropolitan University, on the analysis of the responses.

The findings provide a unique snapshot of the respondents' experiences and their observations on the support provided for home learning in these 27 countries in the first six months of the pandemic. The respondents identified as parents, teachers, staff members of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and/or ministry or government officials. Although we were focused on the experiences of learners with disabilities, the respondents did not confine their responses to these learners and described the home learning provision (resources and additional support) that learners had access to.

In this article, we focus on the responses to the French and Arabic translations of the online questionnaire, which contribute to EENET's third domain change, "to support people to be more effective at influencing policy and practice change in education" (Lewis 2016). All of the French-speaking respondents ( $n=52$ ) were from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and 38 of the Arabic-speaking respondents lived and/or worked in northern Syria. Both countries have been affected by protracted conflict, and DRC has also experienced a series of Ebola outbreaks in recent years. Our focus on these countries, therefore, offers insights into the home learning provision available in countries with previous experience in developing education in emergencies interventions. We share our findings on what the respondents identified as the benefits, challenges, opportunities, and barriers to supporting home learning. We look at the extent to which the home learning provision catered to learners with disabilities—if indeed it did so at all—and examine the role parents and local community networks played in enabling home learning support within an education in emergencies context. We offer recommendations for how to strengthen education systems and preparedness for future crises.

## **A HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF COVID-19 UP TO JULY 2020**

DRC and Syria have both been affected by protracted conflict. DRC, which is experiencing one of the world's most persistent humanitarian crises, is said to have the largest number of internally displaced people of any African country, 5.2 million (UNICEF 2021). Syria, due to its decade-long civil war, is experiencing the

worst refugee crisis in the region since World War II (McNatt et al. 2018). At least 13.5 million people have been displaced by the conflict, including 6.7 million who have fled the country and are now living as refugees (UNHCR 2020a). Before the pandemic, education in emergencies had been in place in both countries for some time, with well-established education clusters, which are interagency coordinating mechanisms for agencies and organizations with expertise in education-based humanitarian response in contexts of internal displacement. However, growing food insecurity, weakened and weakening health and education outcomes and systems, and economic shocks left large numbers of people in both countries highly vulnerable to the multiple negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF 2020; USAID 2021).

When the surveys were conducted for the EENET/NAD project, multilateral and international NGOs were working with government and local partners to deliver a range of education and protection interventions in the autonomous region of North and East Syria, where all survey respondents from that country resided. We do not include any details on these organizations; the respondents from both countries completed the survey anonymously, so we cannot associate their responses with named organizations in either of them.

## DRC

Areas of DRC have experienced instability and conflict for decades. In the eight months before June 2020 (when the survey was online), conflict resulted in 1,300 civilian deaths and 110,000 displaced people (OHCHR 2020), in addition to the million-plus displaced in previous years (e.g., UN OCHA 2017). DRC nonetheless made significant progress in regard to education, raising primary education completion rates in the country from 29 percent in 2002 to 70 percent in 2014. However, it is still among the countries with the highest number of out-of-school children and also faces challenges in terms of education quality and inclusion. The DRC Education Sector Plan (2016-2025) focuses on expanding access and improving governance generally, and on the provision of support and education to populations displaced by conflict. This plan includes a focus on “the development of a programme to promote inclusive and special education for vulnerable learners” (RDC 2015, 47; translation from French), but no specific definitions of “special” and “inclusive” have been provided.

The first COVID-19 cases in DRC were identified in March 2020 (WHO 2021), which the questionnaire respondents said led to a government-declared state of emergency and the forming of a multisectoral national pandemic strategy

committee. The lockdown, which was first enforced in Kinshasa, became countrywide toward the end of March. Restrictions were imposed at the borders, and airline flights from countries where people were infected with COVID-19 were suspended. Congolese citizens returning to the country were advised to self-quarantine for 14 days. Schools, universities, restaurants, and places of worship were shut, and gatherings of more than 20 people were prohibited (Reliefweb 2021).

The DRC's fragile healthcare system has long been overburdened by civil conflict and other epidemics, such as multiple outbreaks of Ebola, which limited its capacity to conduct COVID-19 testing and sampling. In addition, an inadequate number of health workers and limited medical and personal protective equipment left the country ill-equipped to fight the pandemic.

## SYRIA

After a decade of political and socioeconomic unrest and related conflict, Syria's infrastructure was under significant strain even before the outbreak of COVID-19 (Gharibah and Mehchy 2020). In early March 2020, the government began to close land borders around the country in order to prevent transmission of the virus to the areas of autonomous administration in North and East Syria (Huang et al. 2020). Fearing that infection could enter these areas from the government-held areas, opposition groups tried to limit the movement of people at checkpoints along the front line in northern Syria.

As survey respondents confirmed, the reality of the virus was widely accepted, but a lack of access to and appropriate community education around preventative methods, diagnosis, and treatment created suspicion in the communities. For example, officials were suspected of downplaying the number of cases. Stigma against those who contracted COVID-19 and an overwhelmed healthcare system prevented people from getting tested, resulting in the underreporting of cases (Mohsen et al. 2021). The ministry of education announced that lessons in public and private schools would be suspended starting on March 14. Travelers from countries affected by COVID-19 were barred from entering Syria, even if they had residence permits or visas from Syrian diplomatic missions. Syrian citizens who did not display symptoms of the virus could enter the country if they underwent a two-week quarantine.



## RESEARCH DESIGN

In April 2020, EENET and NAD decided to develop guidance materials for parents, caregivers, and families of children with and without disabilities. The materials were designed to encourage appropriate, achievable, low-stress learning activities using the time, skills, and resources available in families. They would initially be distributed through existing EENET and NAD project partnerships in a small number of African countries, eventually achieving wider distribution through EENET's global information-sharing network. To ensure that the materials addressed unmet needs and reached the most excluded children, we needed to find out what provisions were already in place for supporting home learning and how easily families could access and use them. To inform the development of the materials, we wanted to know how children's learning was being supported at home while schools were closed, and what the biggest barriers were to learning at home, especially for children with disabilities.

We conducted an online survey to provide a snapshot of home learning situations around the world from the perspective of parents, families, and those who know them well. The project team collaborated remotely to develop a short, easy-to-answer survey that could be completed quickly by parents who were juggling the oversight of their children's education, working from home, providing for their families' basic needs, and/or had limited data access. The questions (for more information, see Corcoran, Pinnock, and Twigg 2020a, 2020b) were designed to generate a combination of quantitative and qualitative data and focused on

- how schools were affected by the pandemic;
- if schools were closed and learners were received education support at home, what this support looked like and who provided it;
- how learners were engaging with the home learning provision and how they were reacting to the situation;
- how parents and/or guardians felt and whether they were receiving advice or practical support to help with home learning;
- whether learners with disabilities received home learning provision appropriate to their needs; and
- what respondents thought were the best ideas being used in their countries/ areas to support home learning.

The questionnaire in English was uploaded onto the SurveyGizmo platform on May 1, 2020. Over the next few weeks, translated versions in 13 other languages (Acholi, Arabic, Armenian, Bahasa Indonesia, French, Kiswahili, Luganda, Malay, Portuguese, Runyankole, Russian, Spanish, and Ukrainian) were uploaded and remained live until the end of June 2020. The languages chosen reflected the contexts in which EENET and NAD were involved in ongoing projects, and on the language skills of EENET consultants and EENET/NAD friends who volunteered to translate the questionnaires. The links to the questionnaires were found on the EENET website and shared using EENET's social media accounts, emails to network members, and direct messages to colleagues working for other organizations in the field of inclusive education. The survey was completed by more than one thousand respondents from 27 countries in 10 languages.

In DRC, snowball sampling was key to the survey's success. The link to the questionnaire in French was sent directly to a colleague working for a community-based organization in Bukavu, who shared it with contacts across the country. It was completed by 52 respondents in South Kivu Province, North Kivu Province, and Kinshasa (in descending order of frequency). The link to the Arabic survey was shared via email and social media to EENET's growing Arabic language community (see Qwaider 2018). Of the 40 respondents, who represented three countries, 38 came from northern Syria. An additional respondent from Syria completed the English-language questionnaire, bringing the total number of respondents from Syria to 39.

The landing page for the questionnaires provided a brief overview of the project and clearly outlined how their completion of the survey equated with giving their consent. EENET's contact details were included in case respondents later wished to withdraw their consent. No personal information was requested beyond the respondent's country and any information they chose to provide in relation to this. Responses to the questionnaires were downloaded from the SurveyGizmo platform and transferred to Excel spreadsheets (quantitative data) or Word tables (qualitative data). The data was redacted to remove any identifying information. Only the anonymized data was kept for analysis purposes. The raw data files were deleted once the transfer, translation, and redaction had taken place.

To provide an overview of each country's situation, the data was analyzed thematically, country by country, question by question. The responses to each question were coded for specific themes evident in the detail provided by the respondents and categorized accordingly. The initial rapid analysis was published in the form of open-access reports on the EENET website (e.g., Corcoran et al.

2021a, 2021b). In the following sections, we share our findings from a further analysis of the responses from DRC and Syria. We acknowledge the limitations of the data, given that respondents were invited to participate in the survey through their local networks. The responses therefore are mainly from people working in the NGO and/or education sector. We do not have data from parents in these two countries who could not read or access the internet.

## HOME LEARNING PROVISION IN DRC

Respondents to the questionnaire in French described themselves as parents (n=35), NGO workers (n=21), social workers (n=12), teachers (n=6), consultants (n=3), university lecturers (n=2), and education officials (n=6), or as government officials (n=3), who were able to report on the whole country as well as on their own situations. This is reflected in the responses below.

Schools were completely closed during this stage of the pandemic (May-June 2020), and children were confined to their homes and communities. Two respondents stated that a few schools were operating partially. There was general concern that the school closures would cause children to be left behind and would “constitute a danger for them and for the community because some of them have become delinquent.” Others commented that

children and parents are in dire straits when it comes to their intellectual lives. For some children, the parents take action to make them review course notes every day. Others spend hours on television and in games.

At home, where most of them are idle, they do nothing and their parents do not take care of them. For lack of occupation, some walk around without an objective. Others circulate in the street and are confused with children in particularly difficult situations.

According to 72 percent of the respondents in DRC, no home learning support or material resources were provided after the schools closed. Only 9 percent (n=5) said that, to their knowledge, some materials and remote lessons (e.g., through television and radio) had been made available. Support for home learning was delivered by provincial education authorities and varied from area to area. Respondents working for these authorities or for NGOs reported that discussions were under way to develop remote lessons and education recovery plans. Although

these interventions had begun in some areas, there was little practical progress for most families. With support from international development partners, the ministry of education broadcast television and radio lessons for learners at the early years level upward and provided online course materials.

The respondents were generally not positive about the support provided, and they felt the provincial governments did not have sufficient capacity to organize effective home learning. Several said that teachers had not agreed to provide remote teaching:

...it is expected that teachers will use some media chosen by government to teach children at home, and academics will deliver online education. This mechanism is very badly understood by many observers, parents, teachers, and even children and students, especially on the feasibility or the practical application of this mechanism.

Respondents in all three locations mentioned that international NGOs and the government had developed materials to support home learning, but most were not available in hard-copy formats. Those working for the national ministry of education office reported that hard-copy materials were distributed, but most other respondents stated that they had not seen any: “No printed documents handed over, no electrical power to follow the broadcast lessons.” Another explained that learning was

impossible with distance education, there is no power, not all families are able to have a television set at home without an internet connection. This teaching is reserved only for the children of the rich.

The DRC respondents made several concrete recommendations to improve the education response to the pandemic, which focused mainly on access to resources, for example:

- Extending school meal programs to meet needs of families affected by the lockdown
- Providing learners with educational supplies, batteries, and/or electricity to enable them to access home learning provision (this includes access to televisions), and

- Ensuring maximum protection from COVID-19 by providing school staff members and learners with access to washing facilities, masks, and alcohol sanitizers, and distributing handwashing basins.

### PARENTS' EXPERIENCES

Several DRC respondents expressed frustration, particularly a small number of parents living in areas where schools were closed and life was disrupted by the shutdowns, even though the level of COVID-19 infections was low. Many felt that the government was unable to coordinate the programs needed to deliver relevant home learning provision to most of the population. Some parents who had access to the internet, radio, and television reported being happy to teach their children at home; a small number said they had received course materials online: “The government posted the course online and it gives a little satisfaction since we have a basis to be able to accompany our children as they study at home.”

However, most respondents expressed concern for families across the DRC who had no access to these resources, and about the lack of coordinated support for education. Having no information on when schools would reopen created additional worries, and some noted that “children are at home without any supervision or follow-up from our government.”

Many parents felt that home learning provision was “a scam” because many children had no access to television, internet, or radio, and they lacked the textbooks and other materials required for home learning. The findings also highlighted the inequality of the home learning provision; 14 percent of respondents mentioned that some parents had hired private tutors and 8 percent described how they had purchased resources online.

A DRC respondent who worked at an NGO explained that the parents they were in contact with

...want their children to be supervised regardless of any condition... because they are really unable even to find the means of survival for their children. Most of them are widowed women... and the others have physical impairments linked to conflict, also characterized by the extreme poverty inherent to post conflict zones.

Survey respondents in DRC expressed an overwhelming sense of frustration at the lack of infrastructure for home learning and the failure to target resources to those who needed the most support. There was general dissatisfaction with how the school closures compounded the survival and safeguarding challenges faced by children and families; the safeguarding challenges faced by most children with disabilities were noted to be even worse.

A variety of teaching and learning materials were developed by NGOs and their development partners in the four months after the school closures began. However, families' lack of money to pay for power or equipment and the lack of government coordination in distributing hard-copy materials were identified as major barriers to using these materials.

### LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES

All the DRC survey respondents were adults, and the learners' descriptions are predominantly from an adult point of view. The respondents were concerned about unsupervised children's safety and "delinquency." It was unclear whether more children were homeless due to the pandemic, but several respondents working for organizations that focus on street-connected children reported that their numbers were increasing due to "parents' inability to look after them during the day."

Respondents frequently reported that no provisions had been made in home learning plans for students with disabilities, and they were not aware of any adaptations to home learning materials for learners with various impairments. As one commented:

The government did not think about this category of learners with disabilities. And children studying in preschools receive no educational support other than what their parents offer as a family. Children with disabilities are not even listed. We are not interested in the disabled, they are totally forgotten.

### IN SUMMARY

The data from DRC suggest that respondents holding high-level positions in the education system were aware of home learning support plans, but stakeholders at lower levels were not seeing these plans translated into action. There was limited autonomy for the development of home learning initiatives at the local level, and these initiatives were more visible in areas where international NGOs were active before the pandemic.

## HOME LEARNING PROVISION IN SYRIA

Most respondents from Syria were based in the autonomous region of North and East Syria and therefore presented insights into this area rather than the country as a whole. Like those in DRC, many described themselves as working for NGOs (n=13). Other respondents described themselves as parents (n=10), teachers (n=14), consultants (n=1), education officials (n=6), and a school committee member (n=1). Twelve respondents stated that their children or children they know had disabilities.

As in DRC, schools in Syria closed in response to COVID-19, creating a centralized approach to the delivery of home learning provision was similarly problematic. However, there were clear examples in Syria of interventions that supported learners, especially those with disabilities. For example, the government provided general educational programs on television, which were supplemented locally with support provided through social media.

### MAINSTREAM SUPPORT AND PROVISION AND RESOURCES

After deciding to close, most government schools in Syria did not provide home learning support. Respondents were concerned about the lack of options and resources available to students. Some stated that they had received a number of resources in printed form, which others described as underutilized or not distributed. Parents suggested that organizations should provide printed materials to enable home learning, and that they should invest in preparing teachers to support learners' engagement with the home learning platforms provided.

Other respondents described how they were supported by teachers, and each other. They shared advice about supporting children to continue their education remotely, using mobile phones to access video learning tools. These parents expressed their gratitude. One commented that "we received support in completing our children's instruction remotely using our mobile phones...that were of great benefit to children." Another noted that "the plan was successful, and the goal was to compensate for some educational loss." Providing context for this support, one teacher explained that "we received tips on how to use the camera and shoot the right lessons...the results were excellent in keeping kids out and learning."

The survey responses suggest that this provision was not universal and related only to local programs delivered by NGOs, as one parent noted: "There is a significant weakness in the possibilities and resources available...teachers cannot provide remote lessons using means like Zoom or Google Classrooms." Echoing other

respondents, this parent highlighted how most children did not have reliable internet, which rendered the online home learning experience ineffective. Some parents suggested that there should be more material support at the government level for continuing the education of children who are marginalized because of their difficult living conditions. At the local level, parents wanted printed materials delivered to homes, material support for the continuation of educational projects for children in camps, and safe centers for disabled children.

The consensus was that organizations providing home learning support should strengthen program implementation by providing stakeholders with the resources they need to keep children in contact with the education community, particularly children with disabilities. Respondents recommended providing the following:

- A robust network with an electronically equipped curriculum, to support learners with limited access to technology
- A database for schools and scholars that organizes broadcast television and radio programs by code and distributes printed transcripts
- Good-quality internet subscriptions that enable learners and parents to communicate directly and share learning content with teachers
- A comprehensive electronic platform for all materials, with all lessons explained by competent teachers; parents and learners can be referred to this platform should a crisis arise
- Communication between schools and learners about the use of digital media to support education at home, and
- Crisis tools that enable schools to communicate with students and support teaching aids, and curriculum-specific videos.

### **SPECIALIST PROVISION AND RESOURCES**

Respondents in some areas mentioned that “night schools” were in operation in Syria. The schools took advantage of the hours when electricity supplies were more reliable and internet signals less strained. The respondents did not provide details on how these school sessions were managed or what education levels they catered to, beyond the need to connect remotely. The night schools were coordinated by NGOs in the region.



Teachers created groups on platforms such as WhatsApp to provide guidance for parents, direct engagement with students, and follow-up on night school sessions or on the lessons provided on television and radio. Respondents said these groups did not give the same quality results as online lessons delivered directly by teachers on platforms such as Zoom, but they nevertheless plugged a gap where access to night schools and other online services was limited.

In the early months of the pandemic in the Al Raqqa region, NGO-funded learning and community centers continued to provide for pupils with disabilities. Parents were contacted by these local community centers via social media. Groups set up on platforms such as WhatsApp were used to exchange content (images, videos, and audio) and support their children's learning. This content included targeted support, such as signed videos for Deaf learners.

One respondent noted that the education centers were equipped to support a small number of learners with different disabilities, which they described as audio-visual, motor, and cognitive, but there was otherwise no support: "The future-oriented [center] was the only one that provided educational services for children with disabilities, but unfortunately it was closed after the fourth month for lack of support." Despite the apparent effectiveness of the centers, they were suspended due to a lack of funding.

NGOs in Syria created home learning content that was welcomed by parents and children, but respondents noted that "some initiatives from some self-support groups did not work." Parents highlighted the difference between children being "present" in the education centers and home learning, and that children with disabilities had been "lost" after the centers closed. As one parent noted, "The quality of education is better at the centers due to the direct access to teachers and 'connectionless communication.'"

Once the centers were closed, learners with disabilities no longer received education support, but parents did try to keep self-help groups going through social media. A key takeaway from the Syrian respondents is the importance of including learners with disabilities, even in crisis contexts. As one respondent explained: "The focus on children's daily routine and the granting of educational and recreational activities can be applied to students with special needs to develop their knowledge and practical skills."

### PARENTS' AND LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES

The parents' responses about learning remotely at home were mixed. Some students had not received supporting materials to accompany sessions provided through television, radio, and online. One parent, in contrast, noted their children's "state of satisfaction with home learning, especially with the fear of current conditions."

Focusing on learners' experiences and engagement with home learning, parents reported that their children were frustrated, grumpy, and sad that the schools had closed. However, their comments implied that these feelings were due to the social isolation caused by school closures, rather than to the limited access to education: "They are frustrated that they tend to play and learn with their peers and that is not currently available."

Some parents expressed a sense of gratitude for the home learning provision they had access to:

"Children have benefited dramatically in their education."

"I have a state of satisfaction with home learning, especially with the fear of current conditions."

"Education is a basic need, but a human being will be a happy person to receive learning in any way...with this gratitude and the children's desire to learn, comes a drive to find creative ways to learn."

One respondent noted that when learners engaged with the alternative learning provision, they responded with new confidence in their learning. A small number of respondents reported that their children were happy to still be receiving support and were not affected by the school closures. However, parents were concerned by the limited potential for academic progress offered by the provision:

"[Learners] who do not have access to mobile phone or internet lag behind."

"The idea is not to say it is a successful experience, but a failed one."

“But the children themselves have shown a great desire for remote learning support.”

Parents in Syria understood the value in the continuity of education, and they naturally worried about how detrimental it would be for their children to be without access to education provision for long periods of time. This was especially so when the provision available required children to learn autonomously and parents felt they lacked the teaching know-how to support this learning.

### IN SUMMARY

The respondents in this country all came from the autonomous region of North and East Syria. Lacking a centralized approach home learning provision, NGOs and other education providers offered localized solutions and support that included learners with disabilities. Home learning initiatives were more successful where local community networks and school/home relationships were already in place before the pandemic situation developed.

## COMMON EXPERIENCES AND UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES

The home learning provision described by respondents in DRC was different from that described by respondents in Syria. However, there were some similarities, such as the use of television to deliver centralized home learning provision. In the following sections, we identify four key lessons learned from our analysis of the survey responses from Syria and DRC and compare them to the findings from respondents from other countries, and to the wider literature on learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**1. Closing schools worsened children’s exclusion and heightened risk.** In both countries, school closures increased existing divisions between groups of learners. Some parents, for example, were unable to rely on the child care that schools usually provided. Consequently, they either lost household income and the ability to provide food by staying home to care for very young children and/or children with disabilities or health problems, or they had to seek work outside the home, which put their children’s safety at risk. The poorest learners and their families were most affected by such decisions, which in DRC led to an increased number of children on the street. Parents reported that school closures added significantly to their stress, particularly as it reduced their ability to keep their children safe while they sought work. Their frustration appeared to relate to the uncertainty

about when schools would reopen and, when home learning support and resources were not available, what might be provided for learners in the meantime.

Despite the challenges facing educators in DRC and Syria as they made the shift to support learning from home, or in some cases were left without pay and were unable to support learners at all, home learning did get up and running relatively quickly. However, the delivery of education via television, radio, and online platforms was not ideal. The poorest families lacked the equipment and the means to pay for electricity, data, or channel fees, and were unable to access these programs.

The parents who had to work or had limited education themselves had the least time, confidence, and materials to support their children's learning on their own at home. In addition, the centralized education programs did not consider all children's learning needs. Many learners—for example, those with disabilities—were unable to access the new content. This perception of widening inequality that was linked to both the school closures and the lack of targeted support for marginalized children was reflected in survey responses from all 14 countries (Corcoran et al. 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). This has also been highlighted in other analyses of education in low-income countries affected by the pandemic (e.g., Save the Children 2020).

**2. Context, connectedness, and collaboration make a difference.** Although both countries faced complex challenges during the pandemic, the survey responses from Syria were markedly more positive than those from DRC. The sense of despair and powerlessness in many responses from DRC was not matched in the Syrian responses, where respondents frequently described the useful educational support that was reaching families, including those with children with disabilities. Our survey analysis suggests that local connectedness and collaboration around education were key factors in the successes reported in Syria. For example, education was meaningfully decentralized, which enabled individual regions to make the decision to shut down schools and to communicate the details clearly to parents. The stronger local communication between education authorities and families may help to explain why survey responses from Syria expressed less overall frustration than those from DRC.

An important point about the findings from Syria is that, despite a lack of resources, some regional education authorities in Northern Syria were able to get technical and practical support from international NGOs that were operating locally. As such, they could provide additional support for home learning. For

example, hard-copy home learning materials were delivered relatively rapidly. In contrast, respondents in DRC implied that the education authorities were waiting for home learning resources to be developed by international NGOs in partnership with the central government.

In Syria, information was shared online through existing and new WhatsApp networks. Some of these networks were set up by schools or NGOs to encourage home learning and used by parents to support each other once NGO funding ran out. WhatsApp was used to share learning activities, discuss students' needs, give parents practical information and support, and distribute educational materials. While some respondents in DRC reported using WhatsApp to contact private tutors, active information-sharing networks for members of a school community or NGO program did not feature in the survey responses.

In Syria, NGO-supported education centers provided specialized support to children with disabilities through their existing relationships with these students' families. This involved some in-person visits but also remote advice through WhatsApp and similar platforms. A key feature of educational information and support being shared via the internet in Syria seems to have been small local groups that circulated information and provided assistance based on the needs of specific children. Such support networks were also described by respondents in Kenya, Chile, and Zanzibar (Corcoran et al. 2021c), specifically in relation to teachers connecting with their students and providing a point of contact for group and individual support. WhatsApp has also been used for teacher training and support during the pandemic (Stir Education 2021). The relatively low data use required by platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook (and the availability of data bundles specifically aimed at these apps in some countries) may explain the popularity of these tools.

Although many people in DRC could not afford the internet connection needed to support online education networks, there are useful reflections to be drawn from DRC about how people use and share information when the schools are not operating. Existing small-scale networks between people may be a good way to ensure that marginalized children's education needs are met. Forming and nurturing effective family-school partnerships that involve the wider community is one way to create such networks.

**3. Teachers: A community resource when schools are closed.** Comments from DRC highlighted that “many teachers were at home and the government did not have the capacity to organize them.” This contrasts with the positive accounts of networking with teachers in Syria and suggests that teachers should be treated as important resources for home learning in their own communities, especially for the most excluded children. According to respondents from Syria and other countries that participated in the survey (Corcoran et al. 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d), some teachers provided significant support for children with disabilities and/or health issues. These teachers had a clear mandate to look out for the interests of children with disabilities because they were employed by NGO-funded specialist centers (as in Syria) or in schools that targeted learners with special educational needs (as in Chile). In the UK, children with special educational needs plans (which outline how additional support is to be provided for their learning) and the children of key workers were able to receive in-person teaching at school during the pandemic, while their peers learned at home. When teacher support was not available in DRC and other countries, particularly Zanzibar (Pinnock 2020), the parents of children with disabilities expressed feeling cut off from help and being desperately worried about their children’s health and education.

Reflecting on suggestions from the respondents in Syria and DRC, and on responses to the questionnaires from other countries, there is an argument for the financing of mobile phones and call and data bundles. For example, a respondent from Indonesia, who replied to the English-language questionnaire, described how households were provided with a stipend, via the schools, to pay for internet access. As many teachers have mobile phones (Porter et al. 2015), we suggest that initial funding provided to teachers to cover call and data costs would have better equipped them to reach out to learners and their families by phone, collect information on the most acute support needs, and offer advice to keep children engaged in learning.

Teachers may then have been able to suggest learning activities to parents by phone and act as distribution hubs for hard-copy materials in their immediate community. Local school leaders and teachers could have shared their phone numbers as a first step in developing local networks. Using schools as hubs for information-sharing through the phone network could have been supported even where an internet connection was not available. This would have required rapid and innovative resourcing, but it also could have been a useful area for aid partners to focus on.

**4. Using our findings to develop home learning materials.** One key observation from the online survey related to parents' and guardians' confidence in supporting their children's learning at home. Many expressed their willingness to do what they could to help their children, but they were concerned about their limited literacy and digital literacy levels, as well as their limited access to resources such as textbooks, data, electricity, television, radio, or internet. The survey findings from all countries confirmed that hard-copy home learning materials in local languages were very much needed.

Consequently, the materials developed by EENET and NAD (see <https://www.eenet.org.uk/inclusive-home-learning/>) focused on boosting caregivers' confidence and helping them to understand how everyday activities in the home can become learning opportunities. These materials needed to be used easily by households with limited or no access to other media but also could be used to supplement television and radio learning. When the EENET/NAD materials were distributed, people in the immediate community who had better literacy skills (including older children) were encouraged to help communicate the content to others.

The stress parents and caregivers reported experiencing around their basic survival and their children's educational losses led the team developing the EENET/NAD materials to focus on messages that would build parents' confidence as home educators and help to reduce their stress. Several respondents commented (Corcoran et al. 2021a) that WhatsApp was not effective for engaging early years learners, who needed physical literacy and numeracy stimuli, particularly in households that did not have their own literacy materials. Hard-copy materials are therefore especially important for families with younger children, even if electronic media are available.

The EENET/NAD materials were printed and distributed in Uganda, Somalia, Zambia, and Zanzibar. Local partners and staff members from other NGOs funded by Norwegian donors identified various distributors, including community-based organizations or education centers that were well known and connected to the communities. Following social distancing guidelines, they were able to reach small groups of householders and explain the purpose of the materials. The materials were concise and lightweight to allow for wider distribution. There was a double-sided poster with images on one side and key messages on the other, and a detailed activity booklet containing pictures and activity instructions.

The package enabled family members to engage in learning activities with their children even if no other resources were available. Guidance was given on how to vary the activities, and activities were designed to be frequently repeatable. In 2020, the online versions of these materials were downloaded 1,622 times from the EENET website (EENET 2021). At the time of writing, EENET consultants are conducting a review for NAD of the project's process and results as part of the monitoring and evaluation of the Together for Inclusion programme.

### **CONCLUSION: WHAT COULD BE DONE BETTER NEXT TIME?**

The survey respondents commonly criticized the lack of material support provided to learners while the schools were closed—not only of learning materials but of support for child safeguarding and survival. They emphasized how much the lack of tangible resources disadvantaged the children and families with the fewest educational resources in their homes. These families could not fill the gaps in learning, child care, and safety created by the school closures, especially for learners with disabilities or health issues who had additional healthcare and rehabilitation needs.

The survey findings suggested that respondents in Syria were more resilient to the school closures than those in DRC. Their resilience appears to have been rooted in pre-existing education support networks in the school communities that involved parents through direct communication, and in Syria's regional education authorities' decisionmaking and coordinating capacity. The Syrian respondents' recommendations for future crises prioritized the importance of collaboration and support. This resonates with the first domain of EENET's theory of change; quality inclusive education and learning opportunities require collaboration, and stakeholders must be encouraged to work together to design, implement, and reflect on inclusive education initiatives (Lewis 2016).

The provision of home learning using mass media is likely to reach only the households with the most resources. Further research (e.g., through household surveys) would help to determine the proportion of households in crisis settings that lack electricity and are unable to access television, radio, and internet. We should assume, therefore, that multiple communication channels are needed to support home learning for all.

We also need to better understand which information and mutual support networks are used in particular contexts, especially for groups with low levels of participation in education. School leaders, school committee members, and teachers need tools to become active within those networks while schools are



open. They also need to strengthen family-school partnerships and community “education resilience” to prepare for potential school closures. Teachers should be incentivized to think of themselves as education activists in their home communities, as well as in their schools’ catchment areas, and be encouraged to work with parents to develop collaborative approaches to teaching and learning (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006). When teachers are at home, school leaders could motivate them to identify children who need extra support, such as those with health or disability challenges, and to advocate for this support. This might require a significant shift in responsibilities within the education leadership (Alexiadou 2011; Engelbrecht et al. 2016), but it is a target worth aiming for.

To keep children engaged in foundational learning when schools must close unexpectedly, it is vital that rapid access to hard-copy learning materials be provided, along with related guidance and instructions for parents. This will make it more likely that students will return to schools when they reopen. Waiting for curriculum-specific home learning materials to be produced increases the risk that children will not continue their education. Might there be opportunities to distribute existing learning materials to keep children engaged in basic literacy and numeracy while the new materials are being prepared? Given the large geographical area of the DRC, having more small-scale local development and/or distribution of educational materials at an early stage of the pandemic would have been beneficial. What entity outside the education system could have supported this? For example, could local print shops have been given data and funds to download and print existing graded readers?

Approaching education in emergencies in this way can involve finding and supporting people who can promote education through existing local support and information-sharing networks. Taking this kind of bottom-up approach could help practitioners and decisionmakers recommend future efforts to deliver home learning provision that would reach more marginalized children faster. As Lacey and Viola (2019) suggest in their work in DRC, working to strengthen local education through community-led models that are focused on self-sufficiency can bring sustainable benefits to schools.

EENET’s theory of change highlights the ongoing importance of maintaining support for hard-copy resources for marginalized learners and communities, despite the fast-moving digitization of education and communication. Our survey findings (Corcoran et al. 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d) and the review of the EENET/NAD home learning project and materials (EENET 2021) reinforce this, and we suggest that developing local distribution hubs for teaching and learning materials in conjunction with community organizations and NGOs would be particularly helpful in the event of future crises similar to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Research projects involve many hands to make them a success and this project was indeed a team effort. The surveys, and the home learning guidance materials they informed, grew out of conversations among EENET team members and NAD staff members as we watched media coverage of the evolving situation in our network members' home countries. Several EENET consultants volunteered to join a home learning project advisory board and enabled the survey to expand beyond the small, rapid analysis afforded by the project budget. EENET friends in various countries volunteered to translate the questionnaire—or to copy edit the translations—into the 14 languages, and many others shared the survey links with their own networks. There are too many people to name here, but we have tried to include contributors' names in the data reports on our website (<https://www.eenet.org.uk/inclusive-home-learning/>).

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