

# THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLOSURES ON CHILDREN'S EDUCATION AND PROTECTION DURING COVID-19

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

August 2022

During the fall of 2021, a qualitative study in Lebanon investigated the impact of COVID-19-related school closures on child protection and education.<sup>1</sup> This advocacy plan outlines two strategies to advocate for change:

- **Advocacy for knowledge:** To raise awareness of education, risks and harm, and protection and well-being among children, caregivers, teachers, social workers, and education programme developers.
- **Advocacy for action:** To strengthen the social service system through higher education institutions, relevant ministries, and the professional workforce in aid, non-governmental, and governmental agencies; and to empower caregivers and children through home visits and public showcasing of success stories.

### SUMMARY OF THE CONTEXT AND RESEARCH

Since October 2019, the lives of children and caregivers in Lebanon were affected by compounded crises: an economic collapse that has driven nearly 80% of Lebanon's population into multidimensional poverty, the 2020 Beirut port explosion that displaced over 300,000 people, nearly two years of school closures because of COVID-19 and political uprisings, and the continued hosting of Palestine and Syrian refugees in the country. Testimonies from children, caregivers, teachers, social workers, and key decision-makers in organisations focused on children's education and health revealed a dire state of child protection, well-being, and education. The communities consulted were from the largest population groups in Lebanon: low-income Lebanese families and Syrian and Palestine refugee families. These testimonies revealed not only a two-year absence of schooling for most children, but also an under-researched population of children at high risk of not returning to learning.



**Inter-agency  
Network for Education  
in Emergencies**

1 This was part of a three-country study in Colombia Democratic Republic of Congo and Lebanon, "What will happen to our children?": The impact of COVID-19 school closures on child protection and education inequalities in three humanitarian contexts."

Children at risk of child labour and early marriage are on the rise because of the need to survive the economic collapse. While the limited non-formal education (NFE) programmes have probably spared some Syrian refugee children from child marriage and child labour, many others have dropped out to work or for early marriage. Interviews with high-level decision-makers and practitioners describe a social service system that relies on qualified professionals and inter-ministerial coordination. However, observations from the research study describe a social service system that is short on qualified social workers and thus limited in proportion of the population that can be reached—especially during compounding crises.

This advocacy plan has been developed as a blueprint for policymakers, practitioners, and other leading actors in Lebanon to support their work with children and families vulnerable to distress and those living in violation of basic human rights, including their rights to protection and the provision of education. The advocacy plan underlines key threats to the rights to education, protection, and well-being in Lebanon. It also outlines strategic actions that can strengthen a social support system that has gradually yet insufficiently emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Interviews and participatory group activities were collected from 30 teachers, 16 social workers, 144 children (n=76 females), and 57 parents from low-income Lebanese and Palestine and Syrian refugees in three locations: Taanayel and Arsal in the Baalbak-Hermel governorate and Sur in the South Lebanon governorate. The research team coordinated access and space with community-based organisations (CBOs)<sup>2</sup> in these areas that provide education and health services to refugees and low-income Lebanese families. Once the testimonies were analysed, the research team returned to the sites to present the findings for validation and further probing. The research team also carried out 11 interviews within government and international agencies.

The results were presented under four main themes. Highlights are outlined in Table 1.



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2 The research team collaborated with two CBOs: Multi-Aid Programs (MAPs) in the Bekaa (Taanayel and Arsal) and Beit Atfal Assumoud (Assumoud) in Sur. MAPs provides support to Syrian refugees and Lebanese families while Assumoud is located in a Palestinian refugee camp and also supports Lebanese families.

**Table 1.** Summary of results: The impact of COVID-19-related school closures on child protection and education

1. Education and inequalities	2. Approaches to support learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most had limited to no access to electricity, learning devices or Internet</li> <li>• Teacher strikes led to closure of public schools for a couple of months and closure of second shift schools for one year</li> <li>• Children lost nearly two scholastic years of schooling</li> <li>• Parents often prioritised older siblings over their young brothers and sisters when it came to accessing digital learning tools</li> <li>• Parents often prioritised sending sons over daughters to school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers reported more collaboration between teachers and parents—and between students</li> <li>• Teachers created lessons and one-to-one support through WhatsApp</li> <li>• Teachers experienced a high degree of burnout</li> <li>• Parents with higher levels of education showed higher levels of engagement in their children’s learning</li> </ul>
3. Children’s well-being: risk & protective factors	4. The role of the social service workforce
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents facilitated work and early marriage for their children to secure basic living needs</li> <li>• Children are more prone to violence (e.g., domestic) and neglect (e.g., absence of social play) at home and, for the few who have access to digital tools, during online learning when schools are closed</li> <li>• Mental health workers were less available; they travelled less often to sites or sometimes left altogether; their services were also required payment that most could not afford</li> <li>• Non-formal education was for the most part the only provision of education and social support</li> <li>• Government and international agencies worked on developing the child protection system, although it was inaccessible to many</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal social work provided by teachers to, mostly, negotiate with parents</li> <li>• Formal social service workforce comprises social workers with written qualifications to carry out social work and are members of the national syndicate</li> <li>• Inter-ministerial coordination has supported the management of cases</li> <li>• Families and other public actors are unaware of social services available and the channels to contact them</li> <li>• Social workers can benefit from continuous professional development and opportunities to study for written qualifications to do social work</li> </ul>

## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The results suggest that we require urgent action in Lebanon to minimise the devastating impact of compounded crises (e.g., economic collapse, COVID-19) on school closures and on an unprecedented population of vulnerable children in Lebanon. Below, we highlight three areas that require urgent responses:

### Children's lost learning

Most children interviewed in this study reported having lost at least two years of learning. Those in fourth grade now have literacy and numeracy skills at the second grade-level or even lower. However, this does not only relate to conceptual knowledge. These children have missed critical experiences needed for social and emotional development and literacy and numeracy learning that are foundational in the earliest years of development.

### Heightened vulnerabilities to risk factors

Children became more vulnerable to risk factors during school closures. The priority to survive the economic collapse has taken precedence over investing in education. Some children got married while many others turned to child labour to generate an income for their family. Despite the sporadic reopening of schools, and the availability of non-formal education, those who have dropped out are unlikely to return. Moreover, staying home during school closures exposed children to more episodes of domestic violence and social isolation.

### Limited child protection system

The primary source of social service support has been the ad hoc responses of caregivers at home and teachers and other school-based practitioners. Support mechanisms at the government level, such as the social service workforce, national referral system, and case management system, exist. However, access to channels for reporting and knowledge of these mechanisms appear to be quite limited. Further coordination efforts among leading agencies and organisations and communities on the ground are likely to strengthen the capacity and outreach of the child protection system and its supporting agencies, such as the Social Workers Syndicate of Lebanon and the child protection systems at MOSA and MEHE.<sup>3</sup>

## CALL TO ACTION

Lebanon is a context where policy is heavily guarded by a fragile governance system vulnerable to political instability, conservative nationalist ideologies, and endemic corruption. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the government to close schools during an economic collapse. The grave consequences school closures had on children's education, well-being, and protection requires immediate actions to prepare and empower children, caregivers, teachers, social workers, and education programme developers for the aftermaths of COVID-19 related school closures and future infectious disease outbreaks (IDOs). Hence, we envision these actions must focus on raising awareness and produce user-friendly charters or manifestos of minimum standards on child protection and education during crises. The findings call for at least three forms of immediate action—advocacy for knowledge, advocacy for action and empower caregivers and children—to:



3 The research team collaborated with two CBOs: Multi-Aid Programs (MAPs) in the Bekaa (Taanayel and Aرسال) and Beit Atfal Assumoud (Assumoud) in Sur. MAPs provides support to Syrian refugees and Lebanese families while Assumoud is located in a Palestinian refugee camp and also supports Lebanese families.

1. **Minimise the consequences of adversity and compounded crises** (e.g., IDOs, economic collapse, school closures) on education (e.g., lost learning, social isolation) and well-being (e.g., living under chronic, normalised stress, lack of access to social services);
2. **Address the sources of harm** to children’s well-being and increase access to and availability of education; and
3. Enhance **mechanisms of support** to enhance child protection and address lost learning.

These actions are categorised within the areas of education, risk factors, and protection below.

## Advocacy for knowledge

Caregivers, children, teachers, social workers, and programme developers in government and aid agencies can benefit greatly from more awareness of the significance of child well-being and education and the consequences of the risk factors and limitations and availability of protective services. Knowledge to raise awareness can be communicated through **one-page, infographic abstracts** in English and Arabic that are disseminated in hardcopy and online. Appendix A provides three tables that pose questions to guide essential information on “education”, “risk and harm”, and “protection and well-being” to be shared per target group (e.g., children, caregivers).

## Advocacy for action

Below, actions to strengthen the social service system and empower caregivers and children are outlined. For example, **online webinars, public presentations, and publishing** research and advocacy reports in established communication channels can support pathways to strengthen social service systems. Also, creating **emergency response plans** at school levels can empower caregivers and children.

**Strengthen social service systems** by calling for the following institutions to carry out the suggested priority action points:

- Higher education
  - o Introduce “social work” programmes of study and child protection topics and case management courses in private universities.
  - o Private universities and the Lebanese University to coordinate efforts in developing quality social service curricula.
  - o Incorporate risk, protection, and education issues in education and public administration programmes of study.
- Child protection at MOSA and MEHE
  - o Widen existing networks through conferences and periodic seminars.
  - o Enhance public outreach to communicate what services are available and how to access these.
  - o Institutionalise a schedule of home visits to follow up with caregivers and children.
- Professional capacity
  - o For non-governmental and government agencies to give priority to contracting social service providers with relevant written qualifications recognised by the Social Workers Syndicate of Lebanon.

- o For international and local organisations to co-fund social work programmes of study (written qualification, long-term professional development) in higher education at the undergraduate or graduate level.
- o Enhance the knowledge of judicial and security personnel, including police officers, juvenile judges, and general prosecutors regarding managing individual and family cases and contributing to the child protection and social service systems.

### **Empower caregivers and children**

- Inform children and caregivers of key concepts of learning, risk factors ,and protection and well-being and approaches to addressing risks and supporting learning and well-being by publishing and disseminating one-page infographics in hardcopy and digital formats.
- Encourage schools to set up emergency response plan committees comprising caregivers, children, and teachers to create contingency plans for future IDOs and other crises that may prompt school closures.
- Publicly share success stories of how children and caregivers identified and addressed struggles in learning and experiences of harm (violence and neglect) during school closures.
- Non-governmental and government agencies to raise public awareness of what social service and child protection systems are available and how to access them during IDOs and other crises that would trigger school closures.



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## REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED SOURCES

[UNCRC](#)

[INEE Minimum Standards](#)

Child protection standards and guides: [Alliance](#), [UNICEF](#), [Save the Children](#)

DOPS child protection

MOSA child protection system

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## APPENDIX A: GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR AWARENESS-RAISING ADVOCACY INITIATIVES

### Education

	Concepts	Learning support	Return to learning
Children	How do we learn? How do children learn to read and solve math problems? How can children be autonomous and empowered learners?	Who can they reach out to if they need help in learning?	What are the benefits and costs of education?
Caregivers		How can parents support children at home? How can teachers support children who need extra support at school? How can teachers and parents work together? What contingency plans for emergencies can children, caregivers, and teachers develop for future crises?	
Teachers and social workers			How to find and encourage children who left schooling to return? How can caregivers and teachers support children in the transition from NFE to formal schooling?
Programme developers (Government, humanitarian agencies)	If basic needs (e.g., food, job security) are not met, then teachers, caregivers, and children may not prioritise education.		

### Risks and harm

	What are they?	Causes and consequences
Children	What is toxic stress? What are different forms of violence (e.g., corporal punishment, verbal abuse, sexual harassment)? What rights are children entitled to?	Why may some children or adults neglect or inflict harm on children? For example, are there myths or misunderstandings behind forms of punishment? What are some consequences of toxic stress, violence, and neglect to children's well-being and human development?
Caregivers		
Teachers and social workers		
Programme developers (Government, humanitarian agencies)		

### Protection and well-being

	Concepts	Availability	Access
Children	How to prevent and respond to mental and physical health issues? How to foster well-being lifestyle at home, including positive parenting?	What support systems are available (e.g., MEHE, MOSA) and how do they function (e.g., who provides what and how)? What support mechanisms can be created at the community level (e.g., parent networks with municipality, school, and local NGO)?	How can children and caregivers contact social services (e.g., phone, email, local medical centre)?
Caregivers			What to consider when providing services to children and caregivers: cannot afford travel, little trust in institutions, and home as possible site of risk factors.
Teachers and social workers	How can professionals identify, prevent, and address struggles such as burnout?		
Programme developers (Government, humanitarian agencies)			





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