Rapid Review

Effects of COVID-19 on GPE's education sector program implementation grants

September 2021

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As an independent piece of research, the views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the GPE Secretariat or the GPE country-level partners. The contents of the report do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of UNICEF.

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Executive summary

COVID-19 school closures have been substantial, impacting nearly all GPE partner countries with active education sector program implementation grants (ESPIGs). For example, in one out of five GPE partner countries with an ongoing grant, schools remained closed for an entire academic year due to the pandemic, as of May 2021. The COVID-19 crisis has created an unparalleled disruption across education systems, with consequences and opportunities for ongoing GPE grants.

Drawing on 5-year portfolio-level trends and rapid country-level reviews in six partner countries, including more than 45 stakeholder interviews, this preliminary review provides broad-level and qualitative data on the pandemic's effects on grant operations. It focuses on the period from March 2020 to May 2021 and seeks to understand how GPE partners have absorbed and adapted to the challenges of this significant, unforeseen disruption.

The primary audience is the GPE Secretariat and GPE Board, intending to share timely and actionable findings as the crisis continues to unfold and contribute to learning, discussion, and reflection. The findings shared are mainly exploratory as the crisis is not yet over. A future large-scale evaluation is planned to determine the effects of GPE's grant support during COVID-19 and provide results over the longer term.

Key findings

Progress towards results

- Portfolio-level data show a sudden and deep drop in ongoing grant utilization or expenditure status in FY2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting a broadscale slowdown in grant activities across partner countries.

- The overall proportion of grants rated “on-track” in utilization started to rebound in 2021 compared to FY2020 due, in part, to some countries' easing of COVID-19 restrictions. GPE grant extensions also played a role in improving indicators of utilization status.

- At the same time, those rated as "off-track" in grant utilization increased and reached the highest five-year rate in May 2021. Evidence suggests that lower-performing grants (i.e., off track, slightly behind) typically fell further back between 2020 and 2021 as the pandemic wore on.

- As of May 2021, a distinctive pattern emerges in the GPE portfolio. Grants are fractioned into two extremes of expenditure status. Most are either "on track" in utilization (49 per cent) or "off track" (43 per cent), signalling the risk of uneven recovery within the portfolio. Few grants are in between (i.e., slightly behind).

- Government COVID-19 decisions contributing to ongoing grant delays primarily relate to school closures, but travel bans and other restrictions also impacted grant activities and operations. In particular, the review found prolonged school closures were associated with "delayed" utilization status.

- Grant activities at the school and community levels experienced delays and were often "put on hold" due to school closures and other restrictions. Delayed activities typically included school construction, teacher training, support for school management, data collection and distribution of learning materials.

- On the other hand, systems-level work and grant management, for example, grant applications, education sector planning and dialogue, and COVID-19 response, typically carried on during the pandemic, albeit at a slower speed. Unlike school- and community-level activities, much of this work at the systems level was desk-based and carried out virtually or via newly adopted "hybrid" formats.

Grant flexibility

- Unexpectedly, a sudden upsurge in grant restructuring the pandemic outbreak in 2020 did not happen, possibly relating to a new GPE policy allowing country partners to make minor changes independently. Country-level respondents provided further explanations discussed below.

- Amid an education crisis where the focus is on triaging the most urgent needs, grant restructuring was typically not prioritized following the onset of the pandemic unless it was critical, such as near the grant closing date. In addition, with targeted COVID-19 funding readily available early on in the crisis, partners did not find it necessary to readjust existing grant activities for the COVID-19 emergency response. Finally, others initially put off applying for grant restructuring to allow more time to fully understand COVID-19 effects on grant operations, especially on disbursement linked indicators.

- Country-level grant modifications during COVID-19 were often associated with "quick win" adaptations to planned or in-progress grant activities (rather than incorporating new COVID-19-related activities). Teaching training and project monitoring were among the most commonly modified project activities and utilized digital and hybrid solutions.

- In addition, COVID-19 spurred widespread structural changes to the grant operating environments, highlighting the capability of GPE partners to be agile, adaptive and creative during the pandemic. Such changes included an accelerated move to remote-working and virtualization of the workplace and education sector communication and coordination mechanisms.

- The COVID-19 accelerated funding (AF) and ongoing grants were discrete yet complementary in their objectives and activities. The former focused on short-term emergency needs, and the latter focused on longer-term and system strengthening activities. Priority in the education sector was typically given to the COVID-19 AF grants in the initial crisis, while the ongoing grants were "placed on the back burner". However, COVID-19 AF activities, including safe school reopening, were essential in allowing the ongoing grants to resume project activities.

- Some noted that the new accelerated emergency funding stream showed a unique and commendable side of GPE. Also, the emergency funding mechanism was considered wise in allowing ongoing grants to continue moving on longer-term investments without diverting to short-term emergency needs.

Grant management and coordination

- The local education group (LEG) was a key player coordinating COVID-19 education response strategies, sector dialogue and advocacy in some countries. In others, where the pre-existing LEG was less active or influential, GPE partners and other organizations set up temporary, ad hoc education committees to respond to the crisis.

- Early in the crisis, the LEG and these other informal coordination mechanisms brought together diverse education stakeholders at national and local levels to figure out "who was doing what" and ensure a harmonized COVID-19 response across the education sector. In several contexts, these mechanisms were critical to the coordination and crisis response of overstretched education ministries.

- Finally, grant agents typically reported that coordination with and support from the GPE Secretariat during the pandemic was readily available, positive and meaningful.

Key actions to consider

The most frequent call for action among country-level respondents was better emergency education sector preparedness and contingency planning in the education sector. The COVID-19 pandemic and school closures more often than not caught education partners by surprise. GPE Secretariat actions to consider include:

- Galvanize national ownership of effective responses to future crises by ensuring education sector plans (ESPs) and grants have emergency contingency and response plans, including preparedness indicators.

- Strengthen coordination and capacity for education sector risk assessments in education system analysis (ESA) and grants, integrating metrics for vulnerability and risk.

- High-level advocacy to ensure that education crisis preparedness, not only response, remains a priority on the global education agenda.

The global pandemic led to school closures in most partner countries, often lasting longer than expected. As a result, learning loss and dropout rates are expected to increase, especially for disadvantaged children. The ongoing grants were typically designed before the pandemic, while the COVID-19 AF grants covered a limited recovery period. Thus, there were calls for action for future GPE grants and restructuring to address "the new reality" of potentially extensive learning loss. GPE Secretariat actions to consider:

- Support partner countries to plan, prioritize, and ensure that students return to school and receive effective remedial learning to reduce longer-term learning losses.

- Support investments to assess the magnitude of COVID-19 learning loss and procure better evidence on remote learning effectiveness in low- and middle-income countries.

Finally, throughout most of the COVID-19 period under review, crisis-response efforts were in full motion, and quick decisions were made to guide the education sector through the crisis. This spurred experimentation and innovation, ranging from the virtualization of work and accelerated technology adoption to new coordination structures and GPE funding mechanisms. As such, the crisis has provided an opportunity for the GPE Secretariat and partners to think anew and reflect on what kind of changes to the grant activities, work culture and operating model they want to put in place to embrace the next normal, build resilience and prepare for the next large-scale challenge.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant disruption to education systems across every region in the GPE grant portfolio. For example, closures of schools due to COVID-19 has impacted 96 per cent of partner countries with an active GPE education sector program implementation grant.

Since its inception, GPE has cumulatively allocated over US$6.5 billion in funding for education sector program implementation grants (ESPIGs), which support education system strengthening through technical assistance, curriculum and learning materials, school grants, teacher development, rehabilitating education facilities and other activities.(1)

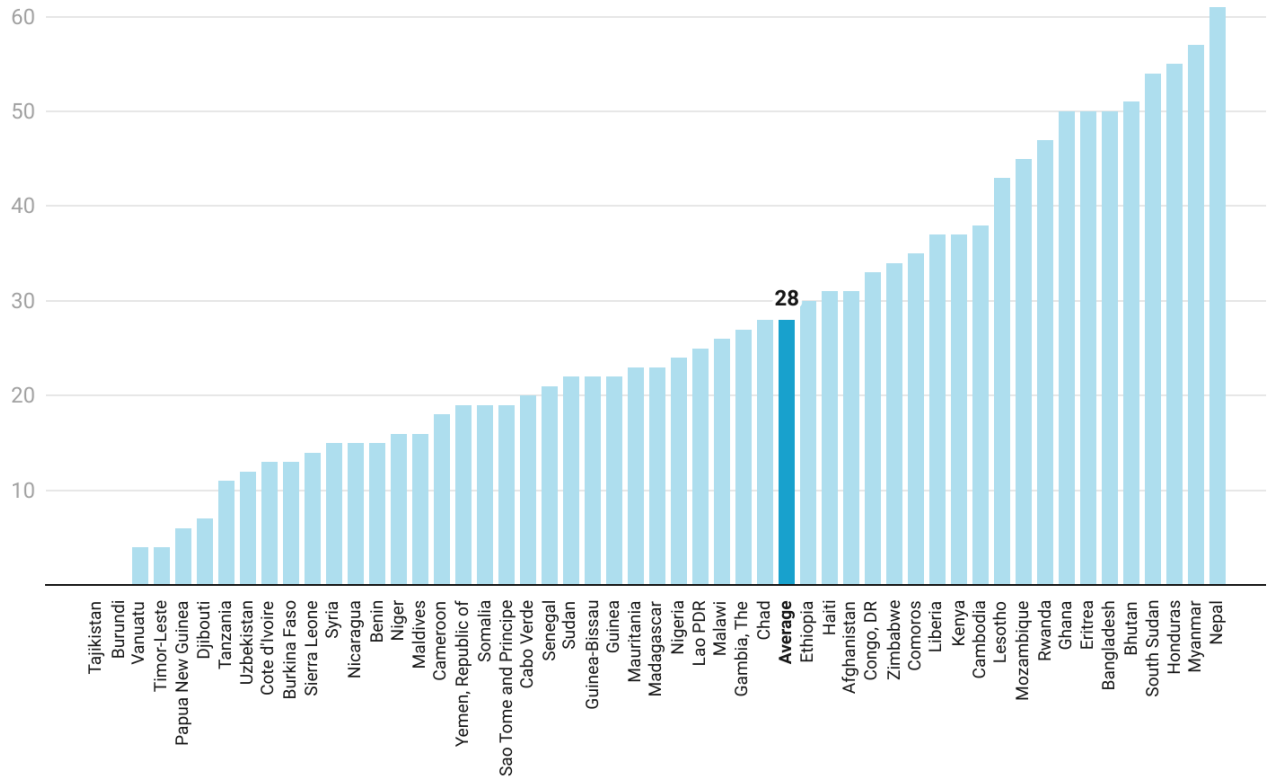
As of May 2021, there were 69 active implementation grants in 52 partner countries, including 37 traditional grants, 15 multiplier and 17 accelerated grants, excluding COVID-19 grants.(1) In total, 59 per cent of active implementation grants went to partner countries affected by fragility and conflict (PCFC) and 70 per cent to partner countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

As shown in Figure 1, COVID-19 school closures from March to 2020 to May 2021 were substantial, impacting 96 per cent of the 52 GPE partner countries with active implementation grants.(2) Closures lasted an average of 28 weeks in partner countries, equivalent to three-quarters of an academic year.

However, school closures were uneven, ranging from 4 weeks to 60 weeks among partner countries. Burundi and Tajikistan were the only partner countries where schools did not close during the period under review. In one out of five partner countries, schools remained closed for 40 weeks or more, equivalent to the full academic year. South Asia reported the most prolonged average school closures. However, the average length of school closures was similar among PCFCs and non-PCFCs.

Figure 1. Nearly all 52 GPE partner countries with an active ongoing grant were affected by COVID-19 school closures

Total duration of full and partial school closures (in weeks) from March 2020 to May 2021, by country and region



Source: Compilation based on UNESCO data (2021, May 31). Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19. • Created with Datawrapper

42 weeks

South Asia
Average duration of school closures among GPE partner countries

34 weeks

Latin America and the Caribbean
Average duration of school closures among GPE partner countries

27 weeks

Sub-Saharan Africa
Average duration of school closures among GPE partner countries

Education systems supported by GPE grants have undergone the most extensive school closures ever witnessed. However, partner countries were in the midst of a global learning crisis even before the COVID-19 pandemic led to rapid, widespread school closures and disruption to student learning. For example, data from the World Bank and UNESCO showed that 53 per cent of children at the end of primary in low- and middle-income countries could not read and understand a simple story.(3)

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing education disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children and youth. Some 11 million children and youth from primary to secondary school may drop out due to the pandemic's economic impact alone.(4)

In addition, school closures hamper essential services to children and communities, including access to nutritious food. Moreover, as fiscal pressures increase, education financing could also face significant challenges, exacerbating education funding gaps. For low-income countries and lower-middle-income countries, for instance, that gap could now increase to as much as US$200 billion a year.(5) Simultaneously, the crisis has stimulated innovation within the education sector that could build education systems resilience in managing future crises.

The COVID-19 crisis and the unparalleled education disruption is far from over. As of May 2021, several school systems in GPE partner countries with active ongoing grants remained closed —either partially or fully.(2) Disruptions from COVID-19 have had, and will likely continue to have, substantial effects on education systems, communities, and children and youth - and, with that, consequences for the ongoing implementation of GPE education sector implementation grants.

This rapid review investigates the COVID-19 pandemic's effects, as of May 2021, on the implementation of GPE ongoing grants. Drawing on quantitative analyses, it describes portfolio-level trends for ongoing implementation grants during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to previous years. In addition, rapid country-level reviews in six partner countries (i.e., Bangladesh, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Liberia, Senegal) and more than 45 stakeholder interviews provide qualitative insights into grant operations and coordination during the pandemic period under review. Ultimately, the review explores how grant agents, partner governments, and partner organizations involved in ongoing grants have absorbed and adapted to the challenges of this significant, unforeseen disruption.

As the crisis continues, COVID-19 case numbers have dropped in countries that saw initial surges and have risen in previously little-impacted countries. Therefore, effects on GPE grant implementation will continue to shift and evolve in ways different from the first year of the pandemic covered in this review. Thus, the findings shared are mainly exploratory as the crisis is not yet over. A large-scale evaluation is planned to determine the effects of GPE's grant support during COVID-19 and provide results over the longer term.

Methodology

The review provides an independent assessment of COVID-19 effects on education sector program implementation grant activities and progress; and grant flexibility, including grant restructuring, and changes to grant coordination mechanisms. It was executed through a concurrent mixed-methods.(6) design and draws on portfolio-level and rapid country-level reviews, supported by triangulation between sources (Figure 2).

The report's primary audience is the GPE Secretariat and GPE Board, intending to share timely and actionable findings as the crisis continues to unfold and contribute to learning, discussion, and reflection. However, stakeholders involved in GPE education programming, policy work, and education coordination may be interested in drawing from the findings and lessons of this review.

Figure 2. Data collection methods, supported by triangulation between sources

Portfolio-level review

The portfolio-level descriptive analyses draw on Secretariat data to investigate grant utilization status, implementation status (based on GPE 2020 Results Framework indicator 25), and grant restructuring during the COVID-19 period compared to previous years.

Country-level reviews

The rapid country-level reviews draw on more than 45 semi-structured interviews, including inputs from GPE partners in six countries and a detailed review of grant documents, including but not limited to grant performance reports, country program documents, and restructuring requests.

The sampled countries for the country-level reviews reflect diversity in terms of geographic contexts, country income groups, grant agents, funding modalities, and grant amounts (Table 1). Data collection was undertaken in a short timeframe when GPE partners were still grappling with the impact of COVID-19. Given this context, the focus was on extracting maximum value from the number of interviews feasible while minimizing the potential data collection burden on research participants.

A purposive selection of GPE partners ensured that diverse viewpoints contributed to and are reflected in the findings, including four representatives of ministries of education, 15 representatives of grant agents, seven representatives of coordinating agencies, 10 representatives of civil society or teacher groups, and 10 members of the Secretariat. The country-level reviews are not generalizable to all country partners or grants; however, they may provide insights relevant to those operating in similar contexts.

Table 1 Sample characteristics for the country-level reviews

Country	Country characteristics	Grant agent and amount
Afghanistan	PCFC Low-income South Asia	• World Bank ($100M) • UNICEF ($20M) Accelerated
Bangladesh	Lower-middle income South Asia	• UNICEF ($8.3M) Accelerated
Congo DR	PCFC Low-income Sub-Saharan Africa	• World Bank ($100M) • UNICEF ($20M) Accelerated
Liberia	PCFC Low-income Sub-Saharan Africa	• World Bank ($11.9M)
Sierra Leone	Low-income Sub-Saharan Africa	• UNICEF ($17.2M) Accelerated
Senegal	Lower-middle income Sub-Saharan Africa	• AFD ($42.6) Multiplier

Findings - Progress towards results

Portfolio-level data show a sudden and deep drop in ongoing grant expenditures in 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting an initial slowdown in grant activities due to the outbreak. However, the proportion of grants rated “on-track” in utilization started to rebound in 2021.

At the GPE portfolio level, the indicators of implementation progress are utilization status and implementation status (Indicator 25), rated on a three-point scale. (7) The results here focus on grant utilization status because it is a relatively robust indicator of implementation progress and up-to-date 2021 figures were available at the time of writing.

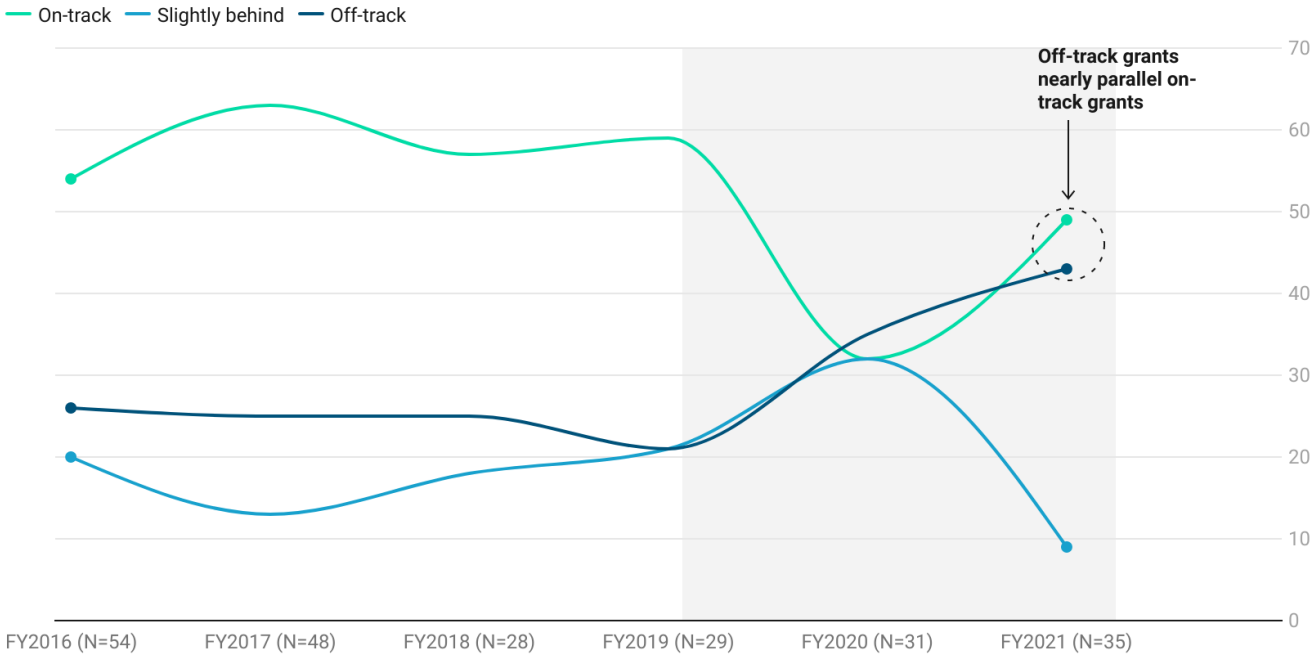
Delays in using grant funds are a warning sign of potential delays in implementation. (8) For utilization rating, GPE compares the proportion of grant funds utilized to the elapsed grant time. If the time elapsed exceeds funds used by more than 25 per cent, the grant is rated “off-track”.(9)

With the onset of the pandemic, the fiscal year 2020 (FY2020) marked the steepest decline in GPE grant utilization ratings for which comparable data are available.(10) As shown in Figure 3, the proportion of grants rated “on-track” in utilization status was revised downwards to 32 per cent in FY2020, compared to a relatively stable year-on-year average of 58 per cent during the previous four fiscal years.

Also, “off-track” grants increased from an average of 25 per cent during the previous four fiscal years to 35 per cent in FY2020, becoming the most prevalent utilization rating for the first time on record. Lastly, grants rated as "slightly behind" also increased in FY2020.

Figure 3. Grant utilization steeply declines with the onset of COVID-19 but increases in 2021

The proportion of ongoing grants rated as "on-track", "slightly behind", and "off-track" in utilization status from FY2016 to May 2021



Shaded area indicates the COVID-19 period

Source: GPE. (2020, July). Annual grant status report 2020. Global Partnership for Education. Partial data for 2021 is based on GPE disbursement and utilization data from May 2021. • Created with Datawrapper

An updated analysis of grant utilization status shows the overall proportion of ongoing grants in the portfolio with "on-track" ratings picked up in FY2021 compared to FY2020.(1) As shown in Figure 3, the figure revised upwards to 49 per cent by May 2021. Yet, it remained lower than the pre-COVID-19 average level of 58 per cent. A robust group of grants on track before the pandemic have remained so (i.e., Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Malawi, Somalia-Puntland).

In addition, restructuring to extend the project closing dates had a positive impact on 2021 utilization ratings for several grants (i.e., Lao PDR, Lesotho, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe). Furthermore, the easing of government restrictions and school re-openings in some countries enabled grant activities to resume. For example, in Bangladesh, the temporary lifting of stay-at-home orders and domestic travel bans from September 2020 to March 2021 enabled some grant activities to take place, contributing to an improved utilization rating in 2021 (see Box 1).

Box 1. Existing implementation challenges exacerbated by nationwide COVID-19 restrictions in Bangladesh

The $8.3 million GPE accelerated grant implemented by UNICEF experienced delays in implementation and was "slightly behind" in grant utilization before the pandemic, primarily related to school-level activities in host communities. Implementation delays were further exacerbated by the outbreak. Bangladesh is one of the GPE partner countries with the most extended duration of COVID-19 school closures. Initially, the government classified education as “non-essential”, and schools remained closed throughout the country for more than 50 weeks, as of May 2021. In addition, informal learning centres in Rohingya refugee camps, supported by the grant, were closed with the pandemic. The grant agent experienced restricted access to camps under heightened COVID-19 government health restrictions, which prioritized access to organizations providing health and lifesaving services.

In September 2020, through restructuring, the project received a 12-month extension to complete delayed activities. In addition, a temporary easing of stay-at-home orders and domestic travel bans from September 2020 to March 2021 meant that some project activities could occur, such as school construction and the distribution of school effectiveness grants. As a result, the grant moved forward on implementation, which is reflected in the "on-track" utilization status as of May 2021. Since that time, with rising COVID-19 case numbers, tighter curbs on nonessential activity and domestic travel have been re-introduced nationwide.

As the overall proportion of grants with "on track" ratings increased in 2021, but at the same time, those rated as "off-track" in grant utilization increased and reached the highest five-year level in May 2021. It climbed from 35 per cent in FY2020 to 43 per cent as of May 2021 and is significantly higher than the pre-COVID-19 average level (25 per cent).

Lower-performing grants (i.e., off track, slightly behind) before the pandemic typically fell further back as the pandemic wore on (i.e., Liberia, Madagascar, Chad, Comoros). Thus, in such contexts, pre-existing implementation challenges were likely exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

There were only a few cases (i.e., Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho) of "behind" grants in FY2019 improving to "on-track" utilization status during the pandemic. The grant in the Democratic Republic of Congo achieved this partly due to restructuring that streamlined grant activities and extended the closing date (see Box 2).

Finally, the proportion of grants rated as “slightly behind” in utilization has fallen as the COVID-19 pandemic presses on. The proportion rose to 32 per cent during the initial period of the pandemic (FY2020), significantly higher than the pre-COVID-19 average level (18 per cent) but dropped to 9 per cent by May 2021, the lowest proportion over the five years under review. Slightly behind grants typically decreased to “off-track” status during the pandemic.

A more nuanced analysis of specific utilization rate values (%) in Box 3 suggests that most grants - even those with "on-track" ratings - showed a downward progression in utilization lag values during the pandemic compared to before, signalling a slowdown even among grants that are performing relatively well.

As of May 2021, a distinctive pattern emerges in the GPE portfolio. Grants are fractioned into two extremes of expenditure status. Most are either "on-track" in utilization (49 per cent) or "off-track" (43 per cent), and few grants are in between (slightly behind), thereby signalling the risk of uneven recovery within the portfolio. This is a new portfolio trend that has not been seen in previous years where most grants have been "on-track", and a minority are "off-track" in utilization.

In conclusion, grant utilization and implementation appear to have been broadly impacted by the initial COVID-19 outbreak. As the pandemic continues, the grant portfolio has become more divided. There is a robust group of grants remaining on track in utilization and weathering the initial phase of the pandemic. In contrast, a larger-than-average proportion of grants have become delayed and may require more targeted and intentional outreach. Future GPE evaluative and monitoring work should continue to investigate and probe these trends over the longer term.

Box 2. Responsive in the face of many crises in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Implemented by the World Bank, the $100 million Education Quality Improvement Project (EQUIP) in the Democratic Republic of Congo was restructured in July 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project had been implemented in a fragile environment throughout its entire life cycle. The social and political context - including a protracted period of government turnover, political unrest, acute violence and Ebola outbreaks - contributed to delays in executing activities before the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the project was only 38 per cent disbursed after two and a half years of implementation and with only seven months left in its implementation period. (11) Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic was only one of many crises facing the education system and added another layer of complexity to already significant implementation challenges.

Restructuring eliminated activities that created excessive complexity and scaled up key activities to reflect changes in near-term education priorities, including a new government policy on free primary education, which was expected to increase primary enrollment. The restructured project extended the project's closing date from 2021 to December 2022. It focused on a streamlined set of activities, including teaching-learning materials and in-service teacher training to support the roll-out of the new education policy.

Schools closed nationwide in March 2020 due to COVID-19 and reopened in October 2020, only to close again after two months in response to a second wave. The government reopened schools in February 2021. Since then, the project has made substantial progress towards achieving renewed objectives in 2021, including supporting the supply chain of learning and teaching materials in four national languages, revision of ECE teacher training modules, in-service teacher training, and a pilot evaluation for student learning assessments in multiple languages.(12) Restructuring activities to reflect the complex environment, school reopening, and easing government restrictions on public gatherings enabled the implementation of these and other project activities.

Box 3. Most grants drop in utilization lag rates during COVID-19

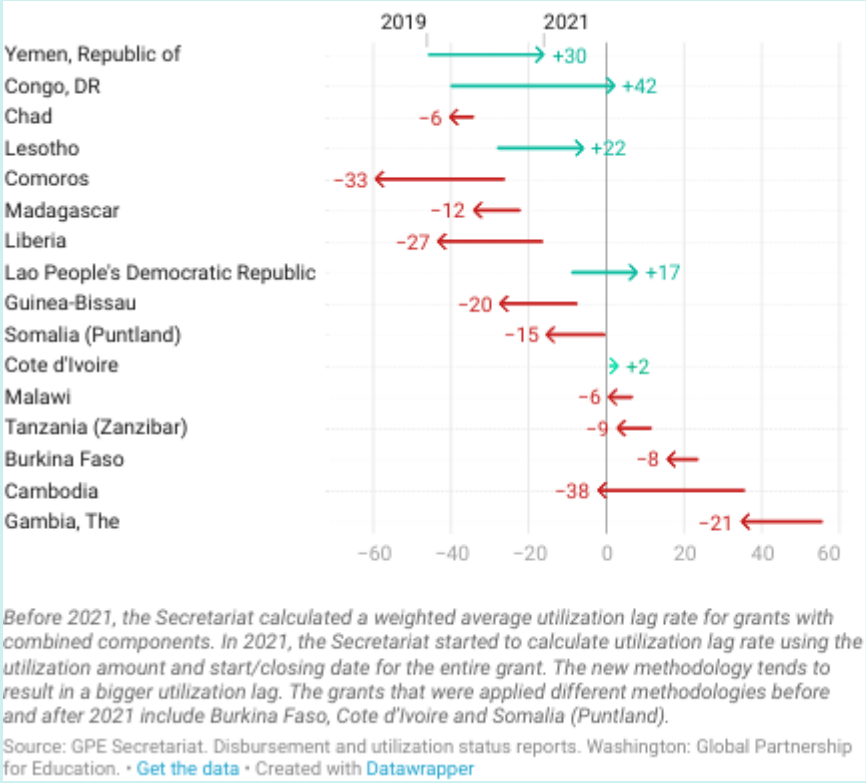


Figure 4. Changes in utilization lag rates (%) between FY2019 and May 2021

The specific utilization lag rates (%) on which utilization ratings are based can provide a more nuanced picture of grant utilization activity during the pandemic period. Based on education sector implementation grants with available data, there was an overall downward progression in the utilization rate in nearly 70 per cent of the grants (11 out of 16) in May 2021 compared to FY2019 (Figure 4). Most grants saw a downward progression (red line) in grant expenditures during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before the pandemic – even among grants rated as “on-track”.

For example, five of the 16 grants were “on-track” in utilization rates in FY2019 and remained so through to May 2021 (i.e., The Gambia, Burkina Faso, Tanzania-Zanzibar, Malawi, Somalia-Puntland). However, each experienced a decrease in utilization values during the pandemic. Similarly, grants progressing slowly before the pandemic in FY2019 (i.e., Liberia, Madagascar, Comoros, Chad) continued to drop further in utilization lag values during the pandemic. There are a few exceptions (green line) where utilization values improved from FY2019 to May 2021 (i.e., Republic of Yemen, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Lao PDR, Cote d'Ivoire), with the grant in the Democratic Republic of Congo showing the most substantial increase in utilization value (42 percentage points) during the pandemic compared to FY2019.

Findings - Progress towards results

Grants in countries with prolonged school closures were associated with more significant delays. Activities at the school and community levels mainly were affected, whereas systems-level coordination and planning often continued.

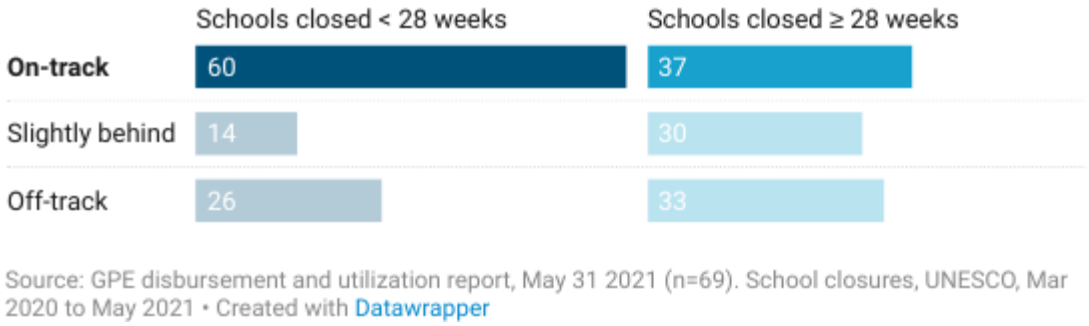
> “What has been clear is that all grants are delayed. If you ask, the reason is that schools are closed.”
>
> -Grant agent representative

Government COVID-19 health restrictions and regulations contributed to delays in grant activities. School closures, in particular, impacted the implementation and delivery of planned and in-progress grant activities. However, travel bans, stay-at-home orders, restrictions on group gathering also contributed to implementation delays.

Nearly all ongoing grants simultaneously faced implementation challenges and delays in the initial months following the initial COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, when global school closures peaked. However, ongoing grants were differentially impacted as the pandemic continued because some experienced multiple and more severe COVID-19 waves and restrictions, while others did not.

Figure 5. Grant expenditures are more likely to be 'on track in GPE partner countries with a shorter duration of school closures

The proportion of ongoing grants rated as "on-track", "slightly behind", and "off-track" in utilization status by total duration of school closures, May 2021



Source: GPE disbursement and utilization report, May 31 2021 (n=69). School closures, UNESCO, Mar 2020 to May 2021 • Created with Datawrapper

The review found that the duration of school closures at the country level was associated with ongoing grant utilization status as of May 2021 (Figure 5). In total, 60 per cent of partner countries with fewer than 28 weeks of school closures were “on-track” in grant utilization, compared to only 37 per cent of partner countries with 28 or more weeks of school closures.(1,2) These results signal the implementation challenges of school closures for ongoing grant activities that were designed and planned before the pandemic and are typically based on the premise of open schools.

In addition, country-level respondents noted that education was not always a high national government priority during the COVID-19 crisis response. Several pointed out that education ministries were not part of national COVID-19 response planning (i.e., "we didn't have a seat at the table"). Thus, attention initially pivoted away from regular education activities with the initial outbreak, and the priority was on health, protection and well-being.

Furthermore, during the initial crisis response phase, within the education sector, priority was on COVID-19 funding, priorities and activities, including distance learning and safe school reopening. In contrast, ongoing grants and regular education programming were often a lower priority and temporarily "in the background," according to respondents.

Respondents commonly described the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as pressing the "pause button" on ongoing grant implementation. In their own words, grant activities were temporarily put "on hold" or the "back burner" due to school closures and other public health orders that restricted grant-related activities and priorities focused on time-sensitive COVID-19 funding and crisis response activities.

In particular, ongoing grant activities at the school and community levels were delayed due to closures and other restrictions. Examples of ongoing grant interruptions at the school and community levels caused by COVID-19 regulations include delays to school construction and rehabilitation in Bangladesh, delays to conducting a census on out of school children in Afghanistan, delays to the verification of school management plans in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and delays in delivering teacher training in Sierra Leone.

A common theme from interviews was that GPE partners planned to continue with and accelerate planned and existing education sector implementation grant activities upon schools reopening and the easing of government restrictions. approached the initial wave of the pandemic as a “passing storm” and a temporary disruption to project activities. At the country level, there were reports of not wanting the pandemic to become an excuse for downgrading project targets or poor performance.

On the other hand, systems-level work related to the management and coordination of grants and education sector planning often carried on during the pandemic, albeit slower. Much of this work was desk-based and carried out virtually or via "hybrid" formats. Examples of system-level activities that continued include:

- In Sierra Leone, the education sector analysis (ESA) was validated through a virtual meeting in July 2020, enabling partners to draw up a new sector plan.

- Senegal continued to have a Joint Sector Review (JSR) during the pandemic by adapting it to a hybrid format, which involved teleconferencing and meeting in person in small groups.

- Bangladesh submitted and was approved for a new ESPIG grant application in 2021. Across the GPE, almost all 45 countries planning to apply for an ESPIG during the pandemic did so before the extended January 2021 deadline.

In conclusion, ongoing grants simultaneously suffered implementation delays with the initial outbreak, primarily due to school closures and other restrictions. Implementation delays were more prevalent for school and community level activities and less so for system-level actions. With the pandemic's growing unequal global impact since the first wave, future GPE monitoring and evaluative work should investigate longer-term grant delays due to COVID-19 restrictions such as school closures and uneven impact between partner countries.

Findings - Grant flexibility

Requests for grant restructuring were relatively lower in 2020 compared to previous years. Minor modifications entailed "quick win" solutions to existing project activities.

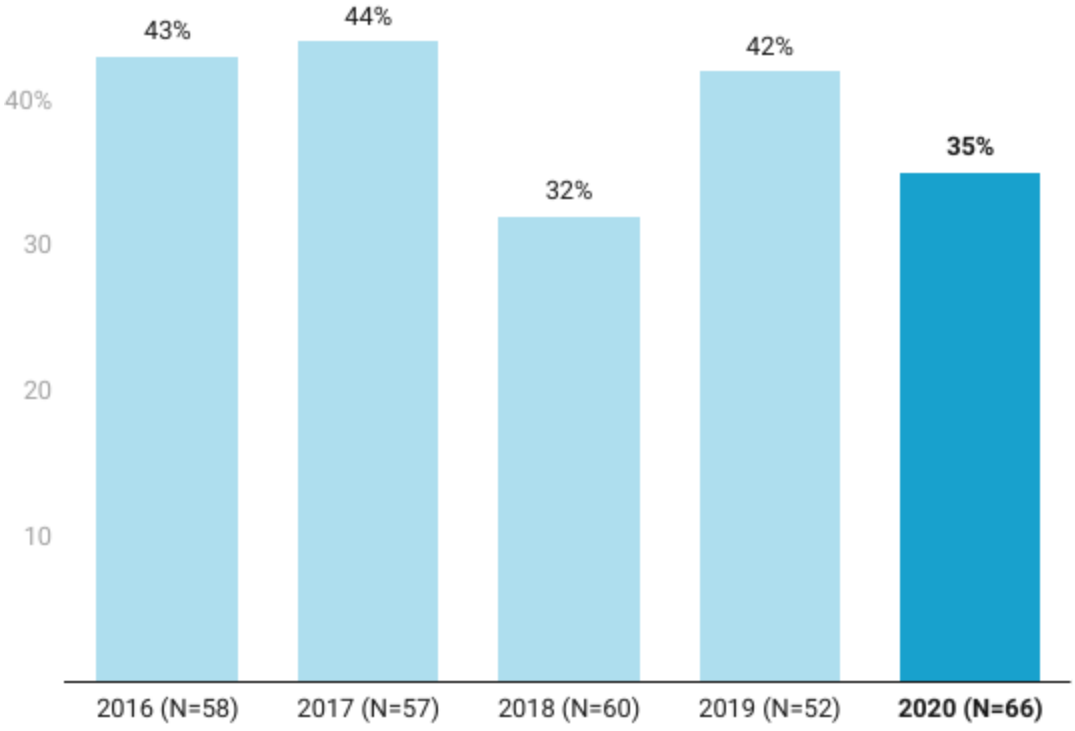
> “We expected there would be a dam break with COVID-19 requests for restructuring. We did not see them, at least not in any large number. The adaptations have been limited so far.”
>
> Grant agent representative

The GPE implementation grant restructuring policy was amended in June 2020 to allow more flexibility for grants to revise project components impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, contrary to some expectations, there was not a sudden upsurge in grant restructuring in the 2020 calendar year compared to earlier years.

In fact, 35 per cent of grants were restructured in the 2020 calendar year, lower than in most previous years (Figure 6). A total of 23 of 66 implementation grants throughout the year applied for non-minor or material grant revisions, requiring approval by the Grant Applications Review Committee (GARC), Grants and Performance Committee (GPC) or the Board.

Figure 6. Grant restructuring did not peak in 2021 with the onset of the pandemic

The proportion of ongoing grants approved for restructuring between 2016 and 2020 (total active grants per calendar year)



Source: GPE Secretariat restructuring/revision data. • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

COVID-19 was rarely the only or sole reason for grant restructuring in 2020. For example, the grants in Bangladesh and the Democratic of Congo had pre-existing delays related to complex operating environments and other crises, further exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Grants restructured in the calendar year 2020 were more likely to be towards the end of their grant cycle. Thus, most restructuring requests included an extension of the closing date by an average of 12 months to account for pre-existing and COVID-19 related delays.

A small number of grants (i.e., Lao PDR, Senegal, Somalia-Federal, Zimbabwe) reallocated existing grant funding towards the initial COVID-19 response, primarily related to the procurement of personal protective equipment and WASH supplies for the safe reopening of schools. Afghanistan is unique in being one of the only ongoing grants to repurpose a large portion of the grant for COVID-19 response activities (see Box 4).

Box 4. Restructuring in Afghanistan to support COVID-19 safe school reopening and learning loss

In Afghanistan, the EQRA project (13), financed by a $98 million GPE implementation grant, repurposed resources towards COVID-19 response efforts.(14) All education institutions closed since March 2020 and remained closed one year later. With a two-phased COVID-19 education response plan in place, the education ministry utilized financing from GPE COVID-19 AF funds and donors such as Education Cannot Wait (ECW) to finance distance education during school closures.

However, US$16.3 million financing from the EQRA project was used to facilitate the smooth re-opening of schools, including maintenance work such as making toilets functional and constructing additional latrines where needed, repairing water supply systems, and provision of disinfectants for schools to prevent the spread of the virus. It will also support the provision of intensive supplementary courses for around one million higher secondary students to help recover the learning loss resulting from the imposed lockdown due to COVID-19 and prepare students for the Kankoor exam to enter higher education institutes.

Several themes emerged from interviews to explain limited grant restructuring following the initial pandemic outbreak. A first explanation is that restructuring was not perceived as necessary or "the first line of defence". Specific emergency funding, such as the GPE COVID-19 AF grants, was readily available to address the initial COVID-19 education response. Applying for new funding was considered less costly and time-consuming than restructuring existing ongoing grants. Partners reported wanting to protect existing funding and remained committed to the original grant objectives.

A second explanation is that grant restructuring was not a top priority amid the competing demands of the COVID-19 crisis response phase unless it was urgent. For example, it was approaching the end of its grant cycle. Country partners were focused on triaging the most critical education sector issues. Grant restructuring was "hard to do" during the initial crisis because it required LEG endorsement and consultation with the ministry, but there were competing demands on ministry time and "communication bottlenecks" in the initial crisis response. Thus, requests for grant restructuring were largely considered non-urgent and deferrable following the onset of the pandemic.

Still, others put off applying for grant restructuring in 2020 to allow more time to fully understand COVID-19 effects on grant operations, especially on disbursement linked indicators. As a stakeholder in Senegal reported, “We are still waiting to understand the collateral effects of the pandemic". In some countries, partners noted that they were only starting to think more carefully about grant restructuring about a year after the initial outbreak. As a stakeholder noted, "restructuring has only recently become part of the narrative". As a result, there may be a rise in grant restructuring requests moving forward.

The relatively lower proportion of restructuring in 2020 may also be related to the new GPE policy, allowing for minor revisions to be made at the country level. Modifications made at the country level during COVID-19 were often associated with "quick win" adaptations. GPE partners tested technological adaptations in some contexts and identified creative hybrid solutions to implement in-progress and planned grant activities, mainly related to teacher training and project monitoring.

For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the project implemented radio-based in-service teacher training. With the initial crisis response focused on health, safety and well-being, some grant modifications protected teachers' livelihoods, such as in Liberia (see Box 5).

Furthermore, GPE partners tested out new and strengthened existing technological tools for remote data collection. For example, in Sierra Leone, drawing on a real-time collection system used during the Ebola crisis, GPE partners used Edutrack to connect with teachers through SMS messaging, enabling them to monitor project indicators, such as school attendance and re-enrolment. This technology was also used to share information on COVID-19 safety and raise awareness about reopening schools, reaching about 9,000 teachers.

In some cases, remote data collection was prioritized during the pandemic out of necessity for verifying project targets to release funding. However, some concerns were raised about the quality of remote monitoring data and challenges in finding suitable third-party evaluators, especially in times of crisis. On the other hand, some respondents noted that the pandemic "moved the needle forward" in adopting new virtual monitoring and data collection tools and prompted some education ministries to become more receptive to innovative data collection technology.

Box 5. COVID-19 modifications to teacher training in Liberia

In Liberia, in-person teacher training was a core component of the GPE $11 million grant "Getting to Best in Education".(15) Implemented by the World Bank, the grant aims to increase the number and proportion of teachers through in-service training for unqualified ECE teachers and accelerated in-service teacher training for unqualified primary-level teachers. The first cohort of in-person teacher training was in progress when the COVID-19 outbreak occurred in March 2020. Rather than postponing the remaining training, the grant agent working in partnership with a locally-based NGO (WE-CARE) continued the training but adapted to a hybrid format. The modified delivery consisted of small, localized, cluster-based learning groups, following health protocols, and delivering parts of the training via mobile phone. As a result, training of the first cohort of unqualified ECE teachers and unqualified primary teachers have completed during the pandemic teachers received certificates, allowing them to be placed on the government payroll.(16)

In addition to modifications to grant activities, primarily related to teacher training and project monitoring, COVID-19 spurred widespread structural changes to grant operating environments. GPE partners shared examples of adjusting work environments to virtual work and an accelerated move towards digital technology to ensure the continuity of grant operations. In the absence of physical workplaces and bans on domestic and international travel, the pandemic brought fresh urgency to ensure that GPE partners at the global, national and local levels were equipped and trained to handle virtual work environments. For countries with limited digital infrastructure and less attuned to remote work, this was a considerable shift.

Some GPE grants directed funding during the pandemic towards the procurement of laptops and data bundles for ministries of education and local partners. Others provided technical support and IT training on video conferencing tools to help ensure effective collaboration and communication.

Furthermore, the pandemic accelerated the adoption and frequent use of low-cost, virtual communication applications, such as WhatsApp, among GPE partners. Respondents noted that virtual tools could provide an efficient and effective way of working during a crisis. In addition, for some but not all, instant messaging platforms facilitated more informal, regular and comfortable communication between education partners.

COVID-19 created an opportunity for GPE partners to engage and communicate differently. Across the partnership, grant agents, ministries of education and local partners worked together to learn quickly to use new communication tools. These workplace modifications highlight the capacity of GPE partners to be agile, adaptive and creative during a crisis and may help shape more resilient working environments in the future.

Respondents reported that engaging, enabling, and supporting education sector partners to work remotely was at times a challenging task. Others noted that social and cultural norms placing a high value on personal and face-to-face communication created barriers to virtual work environments in some contexts. While virtual communications have not always been perfect, they have helped ensure continuity in grant management and education sector planning during the crisis.

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that major restructuring did not peak with the initial COVID-19 education response, and major grant restructuring for the COVID-19 response was not the norm. However, grants made minor adjustments to existing project activities, and there were widespread modifications to the workplace and modes of communication.

The modifications and adjustments to grant activities and operations were often made quickly to respond effectively and to test new ideas. Future evaluation and learning could explore and reflect on whether modifications made during the pandemic should be adopted longer-term.

Findings - Grant flexibility

The COVID-19 AF and ongoing grants had discrete but complementary objectives, timeframes and activities.

> “There are multiple balls in the air, and you have to decide which one you are going to run with, so the COVID-19 AF grant was prioritized."
>
> Grant agent representative

A common theme is that GPE partners and other partners in the education sector prioritized COVID-19 AF grant and other emergency funding activities during the crisis response phase due to their time-sensitive focus on urgent education needs. In contrast, ongoing grants often had a lower priority during the crisis response.

About half of the COVID-19 AF grants had the same grant agent as the GPE ongoing grant. In some cases, country-level respondents noted that COVID-19 grants were prepared with limited input and engagement from those involved with the ongoing grants, partly due to the tight deadline.

Respondents noted that with the initial COVID-19 outbreak, education partners at all levels were deeply affected—some relayed stories of colleagues who passed away and difficult personal circumstances. At the same time, multiple emergency funds flowed into education systems and required attention. In some cases, education ministries were overstretched and overwhelmed, and human resources in national education systems were spread thin. Thus, decisions had to be made about what to prioritize.

Respondents noted that the new accelerated COVID-19 funding stream showed a unique and commendable side of GPE: "[The COVID-19 funding] showed a different type of GPE, which was fantastic. It came at the right time and gave a push to set the operational model up differently". Others described it as providing "easier" and quicker" access to funding than traditional grants.

While the COVID-19 AF funding focused on short-term mitigation and recovery needs, the ongoing grants typically focused on longer-term, system strengthening objectives and activities. This was considered wise in allowing ongoing grants to continue moving on longer-term investments in education reform without a demand to divert attention or course correct to meet short-term emergency needs.

An aspect of synergy between the two funding mechanisms is that it allowed ongoing grants to "protect" funding for what was originally intended. As a result, country partners did not lose sight of the original intention of the ongoing grants. In addition, the two grants operated in synergy to the extent that the immediate actions of the COVID-19 grants - including remote learning and safe reopening of schools - were necessary for getting education systems back to the place where the ongoing grants could then resume project activities.

Findings - Grant coordination and management

GPE partners engaged in and set up coordination structures to enable rapid decision making and a harmonized COVID-19 response across national education systems

> "The crisis created a mood for collaboration".
>
> GPE Secretariat representative

The local education group (LEG) was a key player coordinating COVID-19 education response strategies, sector dialogue and advocacy in some countries, such as Senegal (see Box 6). In others, where the LEG was less active or influential, GPE partners and other organizations convened ad hoc COVID-19 committees to provide an informal, temporary structure for sector dialogue and response coordination.

Respondents described frenetic yet collaborative partnerships between education ministries, donors, and diverse education sector partners following the initial outbreak. A sense of shared purpose to respond to the crisis helped engage a broad and diverse group of education partners.

There are numerous examples of GPE partners with other organizations quickly assembling, engaging, and mobilizing themselves to respond to the crisis through the LEG and temporary coordination structures. The initial months of the crisis were characterized by a high level of activity and regular meetings to support short-term decision-making and address real-time issues affecting the education sector.

In several countries, these coordination mechanisms were critical to supporting the work of overstretched education ministries. A basic yet essential function was to coordinate and map out which donors and education partners were doing what in COVID-19 responses, which helped guide a consolidated education response strategy, establish funding priorities in support of sector needs and avoid duplication efforts.

In many contexts, the LEG appears to have focused primarily on endorsing emergency grant funding applications, such as COVID-19 AF grants, and shaping a harmonized education sector response across multiple partners. As such, interaction with ongoing grants appeared more limited during the initial pandemic period.

There were reported differences in the LEG in some countries during the pandemic compared to before. The first change is that some LEGs showed a capacity to adapt to virtual and hybrid modes of coordination and communication. Another change is that LEGs frequently met in the early phases of the pandemic to make decisions and organize education sector resources quickly. Some respondents described how issues that typically entail slow and laborious decision-making (i.e., adoption of digital tools) before the pandemic were made rapidly and facilitated a greater ability to innovate.

In countries with a less active LEG, some respondents reported that the temporary COVID-19 coordination structures, with a focus on shared decision-making and joint planning, provided an important opportunity for GPE partners to revisit and reimagine the ways that the LEG could effectively function (i.e., “getting the LEG to what it should be”).

Box 6. Shaping COVID-19 policy responses in Senegal

The LEG in Senegal (GNPEF - Groupe National des Partenaires de l'Education et de la Formation), with an established and deep-rooted culture of education sector dialogue, performed an essential function of articulating the national COVID-19 plan into coordinated and specific education responses. Regular virtual meetings, chaired by the education minister with UNESCO as the coordinating agency, encouraged sector dialogue early on in the pandemic and supported coordination and collaboration among education partners. Crucially, this helped build trust in, commitment to, and ownership of the COVID-19 education response among diverse partners. For example, a stakeholder reported that the LEG provided a mechanism for education partners "to act with solidarity" during the crisis.

In the spirit of sector dialogue, the government and its partners also held a joint sector review during the pandemic by adopting a hybrid format (i.e., online and in-person). While described as "lighter" than in past years, it nevertheless provided an opportunity for education partners to collectively respond and reflect on education sector performance during the pandemic.

While the LEG is often seen as a body with a strategic and long-term system strengthening orientation, the example from Senegal illustrates an opportunity for the LEG to engaged in participatory crisis management. It also shows how the LEG can function with an operational and short-term orientation focused on education sector response planning and coordination. A key factor to this enabling environment for sector dialogue during COVID-19 is that a pre-existing LEG structure was already in place and functioning well before the pandemic.

In terms of grant coordination and collaboration more broadly, there were reports that processes changed in potentially positive ways during the pandemic by encouraging greater engagement from embedded networks of national and local civil society and non-governmental organizations. Respondents noted that with domestic travel bans and lockdowns, it became clear that national partners needed to collaborate with and empower local partners to ensure the continuity of project activities. As a stakeholder in Senegal noted, “The quickest support during COVID-19 for education was often led by NGOs with an existing presence within communities.”

For example, in Sierra Leone, the pandemic prompted the education ministry to collaborate more closely with an NGO consortium and has helped bring local partners closer to the central government. In turn, the government can better understand the potential value added by NGOs (Box 7).

In addition, respondents noted a need for a multisectoral approach to crisis response and better collaboration and coordination with partners in health, child protection and other sectors. As a stakeholder noted, “one sector cannot succeed in its work during a crisis without the others”.

In terms of GPE guidance, grant agents typically reported that coordination with and support from the GPE Secretariat during the pandemic was readily available, positive and meaningful. Others commended the GPE Secretariat for their support for both ongoing and COVID-19 grants during the pandemic: "The way the Secretariat processed grants [during the pandemic] is admirable. They are human beings and had challenges of their own at a personal level but they worked night and day to push grant money out as quickly as possible and really need to be commended for that."

Box 7. Creating networks of local teams in Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, donors established an Education Emergency Task Force in the early stages of the pandemic to facilitate regular, weekly discussions between the ministry of education and critical partners. Each organization took the lead on a particular component of the COVID-19 education response - for example, the World Bank focused on school safety, UNICEF on risk communication and UNESCO on education policy. Many task force members were also members of the LEG. However, a key difference is that the LEG is chaired by the minister of education, while donor organizations co-chaired the COVID-19 task force. This freed senior government leaders to focus on overall guidance and support, while donor teams concentrated on management and coordination activities. This approach was considered effective and efficient during the crisis and helped to reduce the burden on the ministry of education.

Another key feature of the Education Emergency Task Force is that it has encouraged collaboration among diverse technical partners in the education sector. It has brought the education ministry, grant agents and coordinating agencies into direct contact with local NGO partners. They also encouraged each local NGO to share what type of COVID-19-related activities they were doing. This information was mapped into a spreadsheet to help ensure even coverage and non-duplication of effort. This collaboration, initiated because of the pandemic, also meant that local teams shared lessons learned and best practices with the ministry of education, grant agents, and coordinating agencies. A stakeholder noted, “This [task force] worked very well. It was very active and beneficial. As a donor, we did not have the chance before to talk to NGO partners. It provided an opportunity to understand what each partner was doing.”

Discussion and key actions to consider

> “Even if tomorrow the COVID-19 virus leaves, things will never be as before.”
>
> Coordinating agency representative

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for all GPE partners to be able to weather major disruptions, not only those working in fragile or challenging contexts. This rapid review has documented the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on implementation grants, including the initial slowdown in project activities. At the same time, partner organizations have found themselves adapting and innovating at speed, especially in terms of communication and coordination mechanisms, and in ways that may have been unthinkable before the pandemic.

The most frequent call for action among country-level respondents was better emergency education sector preparedness and contingency planning in the education sector. The COVID-19 pandemic and school closures more often than not caught education partners by surprise. GPE Secretariat actions to consider include:

- Galvanize national ownership of effective responses to future crises by ensuring education sector plans (ESPs) and grants have emergency contingency and response plans, including preparedness indicators.
- Strengthen coordination and capacity for education sector risk assessments in education system analysis (ESA) and grants, integrating metrics for vulnerability and risk.
- High-level advocacy to ensure that education crisis preparedness remains a priority on the global education agenda.

The global pandemic led to school closures in most partner countries, often lasting longer than expected. As a result, learning loss and dropout rates are expected to increase, especially for disadvantaged children. The current ongoing grants were typically designed before the pandemic, while the COVID-19 AF grants covered a limited recovery period.

Thus, there were calls for action for future GPE grants and restructuring to address "the new reality" of potentially extensive learning loss. GPE Secretariat actions to consider:

- Support partner countries to plan, prioritize, and ensure that students return to school and receive effective remedial learning to reduce longer-term learning losses.
- Support investments to assess the magnitude of COVID-19 learning loss and procure better evidence on remote learning effectiveness in low- and middle-income countries.

Finally, throughout most of the COVID-19 period under review, crisis-response efforts were in full motion, and quick decisions were made to guide the education sector through the crisis. This spurred experimentation and innovation, ranging from the virtualization of work and accelerated technology adoption to new coordination structures and GPE funding mechanisms. As such, the crisis has provided an opportunity for the GPE Secretariat and partners to think anew and reflect on what kind of changes to the grant activities, work culture and operating model they want to put in place to embrace the next normal, build resilience and prepare for the next lare-scale challenge.

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Appendix 1: Terms of Reference

Results and Performance (R&P) Team of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Secretariat

Review of the Effects of COVID-19 on the Implementation of GPE's education sector program support grants (ESPIGs) (January 4, 2021)

Background

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education for millions of children around the world. It amplified existing learning gaps and placed a dramatic strain on education systems, with the most vulnerable children even more so affected. This emergency required action from the international community. GPE swiftly stepped up to support partner countries in their response to mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic on education systems and children's learning and access to educational services. Between April and October 2020, GPE approved $467 million in COVID-19 accelerated grants to 66 countries to help them address the immediate effects of the pandemic as well as plan for longer-term recovery. Another US$20 million financing was approved for UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank to establish a joint regional knowledge sharing and learning-focused collaboration on the pandemic. Lastly, GPE also awarded an US$8.2 million Education Sector Plan Development Grant (ESPDG) to UNICEF to develop system-wide, scaled-up responses to the COVID crisis in 87 countries. GPE's partnership approach and financing, combined, seek to encourage harmonized responses from country-level actors under the leadership of the country, to support education systems mitigate the negative effects of and recover from the pandemic. Please consult this page for further details on GPE's response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The pandemic also profoundly affected ongoing GPE ESPIG grants that were in activity when the crisis hit. Implementation suffered delays and changing circumstances which required to modify programs' design, planned interventions, and scope. Programs that were already not performing well suffered the compounded effects of COVID-19, further jeopardizing sectoral achievements.

About the review

Learning from evidence resides at the heart of GPE's support to address the COVID-19 crisis. As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, ongoing GPE grants faced tremendous difficulties which required them to reinvent themselves and find different ways to work. The pandemic threatened the advancements made by the programs, with the potential to further harm the most vulnerable groups. An agile learning-from-evidence approach is vital both for sharpening the response to the crisis, for documenting lessons for similar situations that might arise in the future, and for learning about innovations that work in crises but that might also hold promise for longer-term solutions.

To that effect, this review will examine the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on ongoing GPE grants, including how (well) grant stakeholders addressed this greatly disruptive event, and how the programs learned from it in terms of continued relevance and resilience, up until the time of this review. This review will also assess how the COVID-19 crisis has affected GPE's ongoing ESPIG grants in terms of their implementation and efficiency (timeliness, utilization, etc.), and provide recommendations for improvement. This review will not examine the relevance, efficiency, and implementation/effectiveness of GPE's targeted COVID-19 support (including the ESPIG AF, COVID-19 ESPDG, and global grants), which is part of another evaluation assignment.

This information will help strengthen how GPE (as a fund and a partnership) ensures that its ongoing grant support remains adequate and successful in the face of disruptive events, and learn from this, should crises such as the current one take place in the future. Second, the review should serve as a broader learning tool for GPE partner countries and partners by providing information on grant implementation and its synergies with the broader sector context. Lastly, this review will serve as a major evidence piece that will feed into a broader summative evaluation of GPE's support to the pandemic response. This final, summative evaluation will be conducted in about 12-18 months, at the closing of GPE's COVID-related grants.

Review questions
(a) Effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the implementation of ongoing ESPIG grants (Data are to be disaggregated and contextualized to the extent possible)

Grant implementation and progress toward results

- Overall 'on/off track' status[1] - Have ongoing ESPIGs remained on track to accomplish their objectives (whether planned or revised)? How have 'on track' ratings evolved over time?
- Delays - Have ongoing ESPIGs suffered any delays in their implementation, per their calendar timelines? Was there any set of activities that suffered more delays than the others? Was there any set of activities that continued unhindered despite school closure and lockdown? What have been the success and hindering factors in grants' timeliness?
- Disbursement - Have disbursement amounts/ratings been affected by COVID? How have these changed over time? What have been the success and hindering factors in grants' disbursement?
- Progress toward results - Are programmes contributing to the expected results during the COVID-19 period? For whom? What expected or unexpected results (positive and negative) have been achieved during COVID-19? What have been the enabling and hindering factors in grants' achievement level and performance during the pandemic?
- Performance by grant type/beneficiary - Has COVID affected results for particular groups of beneficiaries more than others? Which thematic result areas/ particular objectives or intervention categories have been most affected by COVID-19? Has COVID accelerated issues for already underperforming ESPIGs, and if so, how, and with what effect?

- Government decisions - What were the specific COVID-19 related government decisions that affected ESPIG implementation, like school closure, lockdown, etc.? Did they impact implementation all at the same time or in a particular order?
- Remediation - How successful have ongoing ESPIGs been in developing and rolling out remediation measures to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic? What were these measures, and how were they determined?
- Effects on the pipeline - Have ESPIGs (and related deliverables) in the pipeline (i.e., in the process of being developed/quality assured/approved, and not yet active) been affected by the crisis? i.e., in terms of grant applications being delayed, shifts in the contents of country deliverables (e.g., increased agility built in, etc.), interactions with COVID grants, impact of virtual modalities of working, impact on the quality of the quality assurance (QAR) documents, etc.

(b) Flexibility of ongoing ESPIG grants (Data are to be disaggregated and contextualized to the extent possible)

Grant design and scope

- Changes and ongoing relevance – To what extent have ongoing grant priorities shifted, and on what basis? Which changes or revisions/restructuring took place regarding the scope and design of the ongoing ESPIGs? How were these informed (e.g., research studies, benchmarking, etc.)? How efficient, collaborative, and inclusive was the process for these changes? To what extent have ongoing ESPIGs have continued to remain responsive to the countries' needs and priorities in national education strategies, in the COVID context? What have been the success and hindering factors in safeguarding grants' continued pertinence?
- Ongoing grants/COVID grants synergies - How are the ongoing programmes achieving synergies with the COVID-19 AF portfolio? Is the choice of new ESPIG programme components relevant to the current education/pandemic situation? How have GPE ESPIG grant/implementing agents positioned themselves within the national policy space and what strategies have they taken in assisting efforts on COVID-19 education response? (if the ESPIG agent is different from COVID grant agent)
- Gender equality and vulnerable populations – To what extent have ongoing ESPIGs sharpened their focus on most vulnerable populations and gender equality during the pandemic (as defined in each context)? How and how well, based on specific country needs and priorities?
- Systems capacity strengthening – Have ongoing ESPIGs included new, amended interventions for long-term capacity strengthening at the systems level, to ensure governments have adequate means to address this crisis and potentially other crises in the future? How, and how well?

Grant management

- Supervision - What have ongoing ESPIGs learned from the pandemic in terms of imbedding risk management and agile features into the supervision of projects/programs?
- Coordination - Have ongoing ESPIGs used/interacted with country coordination mechanisms during the pandemic (e.g., local education group, EiE, ECW, etc.)? If yes - How and how well, and was this interaction different from the pre-COVID period? If no - Why not?
- GPE guidance and processes - Have GPE's grant guidance, standards, and processes been continuously adequate throughout the crisis, in supporting grant stakeholders with meaningful, timely support to respond to COVID (in a changing environment)? How well did GPE's support interact with grant agents' own processes and, together, allow for speed and quality to address the crisis?

Data Sources

The study will be exclusively desk based (no mission to partner countries) and should include a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. Data sources will include but are not limited to:

- Grant reports and data (i.e., implementation progress reports, completion reports);
- Documents, guidance, and mechanisms for GPE grants, including those formulated during COVID-19, including Board documents;
- 2020 GPE grant performance report and related analyses;
- Surveys or a small number of semi-structured stakeholder interviews to be conducted remotely (as deemed necessary by the consultant and Secretariat during the inception phase);
- Current literature (benchmarking) on how the pandemic has affected similar education programs/projects as well as other Partnerships, and how, in turn, these have adapted;
- Case studies on a small number of partner countries (as deemed necessary);
- Any other sources as appropriate.

For a preliminary list of GPE documents to be consulted, refer to appendix A.

Duration, Deliverables and Timeline

The present assignment will be carried over about eight months. The selected consultant will deliver the following products:

- An inception report, which describes at a minimum the methodology (including a questions matrix); instruments for data collection; anticipated challenges/limitations if any; timelines and responsibilities for the overall review and related report; early literature review; analytical framework (maximum 20 pages, excluding annexes), to be discussed with GPE Secretariat staff for fine-tuning. This report will also provide an evaluability assessment, which will specify what can and cannot be done through the review to answer the questions based on existing evidence, and what additional data collection would be required to do so satisfactorily.
- A slide-show presentation (draft and final) for the GPE Board's Strategy and Impact Committee, describing the early findings and tentative recommendations.
- A formative report (draft and final) edited and designed, which will include: executive summary; introduction (including program description); in-depth literature review; methodology; analysis; findings for questions; limitations; conclusion and recommendations (maximum 40 pages, excluding annexes).
- A learning event, which will be organized after the finalization of the report in collaboration with the GPE Secretariat, to present information derived from the study to varied GPE stakeholders. The consultant will also update its slide-show presentation for this learning event based on the final report, and will also prepare a succinct post-event summary on the event's takeaways.

These deliverables are due following this timeline:
(i) Inception report: TBD with consultant
(ii) Slideshow on early findings and recommendations:
(iii) Report:
(iv) Learning event, and related slideshow and brief post-learning event summary.

Please note:

- The consultant should ensure that all data are collected per ethical standards and that collected data are organized, secured, and preserved for potential re-analysis in the summative evaluation of GPE's COVID-19 support. As such, the review's data (with full anonymity preserved) will remain the property of GPE at the conclusion of the assignment.
- The reports should be written clearly and be impartial and constructive in tone. Each draft should be professionally edited. There should be creative use of tables and high-quality graphics.

Contract Duration

The total number of days for this single STC contract in FY21 is 60 days.

Appendix 2: Interviewee acknowledgements

With sincere gratitude and thanks to the numerous individuals who provided their time and perspective to help shape this document.

Bangladesh
Daisuke Kanazawa, GPE Secretariat, Senior Education Specialist, Country Team Lead
Nor Shirin MD Mokhtar, UNICEF, Chief Education
Charles Avelino, UNICEF, Education Manager
Quazi Faruque Ahmed, National Education Policy Committee, Teacher Representative
Enamul Hoque, CAMPE, Deputy Director & National Coordinator

Liberia
Morten Sigsgaard, GPE Secretariat, Senior Education Specialist, Country Team Lead
Aliou Tall, USAID, Education Specialist
Oni Lusk-Stover, World Bank, Senior Education Specialist
Janssen Edelweiss Nunes Teixeira, World Bank, Senior Education Specialist
Binta Beatrice Massaquoi, World Bank, Education Specialist
Joe Gbasakollie, MoE, Project Coordinator
Goto Cooper, Educate The Future Liberia / Education NGO Forum, Chief Executive Officer
Anderson Miamen, COTAE, National Coordinator

Sierra Leone
Plamen Danchev, GPE Secretariat, Senior Education Specialist, Country Team Lead
Mari Shojo, World Bank, Senior Education Specialist
Celeste Staley, UNICEF, Chief Education
Heather Campbell, Save the Children, Country Director

Senegal
Inès Boumaïza, GPE Secretariat, Education Specialist
Ed Lamot, GPE Secretariat, Senior Education Specialist, Country Team Lead
Guillaume Husson, UNESCO , Senior Programme Specialist
Leïla Ferrali, AFD, Consultante Spécialiste Education
Elsa Duret, AFD, Task Team Leader
Céline Demagny, AFD
Cheikna Lam, MoE, Director of Education Planning and Reform
Cheikh Mbow, COSYDEP, Executive Director
Al Canatara Sarr, Union Inspectors of Education, General Secretary

Democratic Republic of Congo
Youmna Sfeir, GPE Secretariat, Senior Education Specialist, Country Team Lead
Boureima Daouda, UNICEF, Education Specialist
Scherezad Joya Monami Latif, World Bank, Lead Education Specialist
Melissa Ann Adelman, World Bank, Senior Economist
Munsya Molomb Ebebe Valère, MoPSE, Secrétaire Permanent

Afghanistan
Javier Luque, GPE Secretariat, Senior Education Specialist, Country Team Lead
Tilal Mohammed, UNICEF, Education Specialist
Jan Mohammad Ahmadian, ANEC, Director & National Coordinator
Laura Brannelly, FCDO, Education Adviser
Antony Tam, UNESCO, Head of Education
Najeebullah Akhterzai, MoE, Senior Technical Specialist

Global and other
Douglas Sumerfield, World Bank, Senior Operations Officer
Saadhna Panday, UNICEF, Education Specialist
Fazle Rabbani, GPE Secretariat, Regional Manager, East and Southern Africa
Matthew Smith, GPE Secretariat, Team Lead - Risk and Compliance