SPECIAL CHAPTER:

Supporting Education Systems to Respond to COVID-19

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While the world struggles to cope with the myriad emergencies brought on by COVID-19, the pandemic's impact on education cannot be underestimated. It has created the most serious education crisis of our lifetime, and this crisis is particularly acute in low and lower middle-income countries.
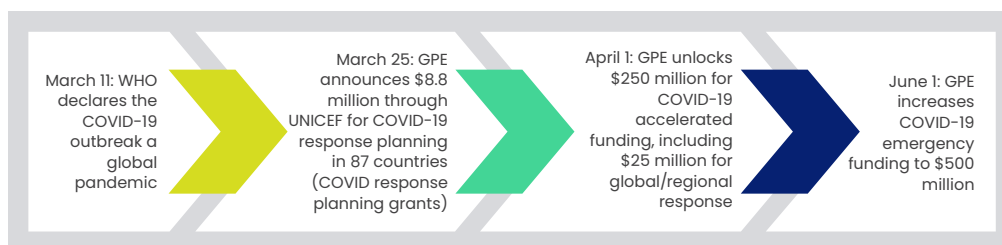
The global lockdown led to school closures in many GPE partner countries, which are expected to lead to learning loss and increased dropout rates. Disadvantaged children, especially girls, children with disabilities, those in remote areas or from poor families as well as refugees and displaced children are affected the most. Children in partner countries affected by fragility and conflict (PCFCs) are likely to fall even further behind because they tend to have less access to remote learning. As COVID-19 continues to unfold, some of the most vulnerable families may lose hope of their children making up lost learning, while the health and economic impacts of the pandemic push children into work or child marriage instead. This means that millions of children may never return to school.

GPE announced new grants immediately as the crisis began in March 2020 to help countries plan and execute their education response to COVID-19. Leveraging all partners, GPE mobilized cross-national knowledge sharing, supported civil society, and engaged in global advocacy to support countries to plan and implement effective education responses. This special chapter supplements GPE's regular results reporting with an overview of the grants and other measures taken to equip countries to respond to the crisis. An evaluation on GPE's support for the response to COVID-19 is also under way.

FIGURE A.1.

GPE RESPONDED EARLY TO THE PANDEMIC.
Timeline for GPE's COVID-19 support

March 11: WHO declares the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic

March 25: GPE announces $8.8 million through UNICEF for COVID-19 response planning in 87 countries (COVID response planning grants)

April 1: GPE unlocks $250 million for COVID-19 accelerated funding, including $25 million for global/regional response

June 1: GPE increases COVID-19 emergency funding to $500 million

Source: GPE Secretariat.

A.1. OVERVIEW OF GPE'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Following the global outbreak of COVID-19, GPE stepped up to provide a coordinated response and funding to partner countries for planning and implementing their response to the crisis (see figure A.1, box A.1 and appendix E). To date, GPE has mobilized US$509 million, representing the earliest and one of the largest external aid programs dedicated to education in the global pandemic response (figure A.2).

Within two weeks of COVID-19 being declared a global pandemic in March 2020, GPE provided immediate support for contingency and response planning through a multicountry allocation of $8.8 million[1] to 87 partner and eligible countries, managed by UNICEF as the grant agent.[2] By April 1, 2020, GPE had secured an initial $250 million for 67 eligible partner countries through a new dedicated accelerated funding window for COVID-19 response and recovery measures, including $25 million for global or regional responses to the crisis.[3] By June 1, 2020, an additional $250 million was made available to meet high demand from countries.[4]

A.2. COVID-19 RESPONSE PLANNING GRANTS

As part of the COVID-19 response planning grant,[5] each country received a $70,000 or $140,000 allocation to fund interventions in three main areas:[6] (1) enhance education system-level response to the pandemic, (2) support the planning and implementation of safe school operation and risk communication, and (3) enhance knowledge sharing and capacity-building both for the current response and future pandemics. The implementation period for the grant was from March 2020 to March 2021. Adopting a multicountry mechanism[7] for these grants allowed GPE to mobilize and disburse these funds quickly on the ground with broad country coverage, enabling GPE financing to reach all partner countries. With support from the local education groups and UNICEF (the grant agent), governments

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1. $8.2 million excluding agency fee.
2. See GPE, "Global Partnership for Education Announces US$8.8 Million in Funding to Help UNICEF with COVID-10 Response," press release, March 25, 2020, https://www.globalpartnership.org/news/global-partnership-education-announces-us8-8-million-funding-help-unicef-covid-19-response.
3. Countries eligible for COVID-19 accelerated funding are those that are eligible for education sector program implementation grant funding, linked to the 2018–20 GPE eligibility list.
4. This decision stemmed from the countries' high demand for GPE's COVID-19-related funding and the notably positive joint efforts from partner countries, grant agents and local education groups to develop and rally behind the countries' COVID-19 response plans. This increased allocation allowed for eligible countries that had not yet applied for accelerated funding to do so within the allotted parameters, which were mainly related to allocation maximums, the time frame for applying and the development of a national COVID education response plan. While this additional funding was made possible by the Board through adjustment in other grant windows' funding amounts and financial carryovers, the Board also stressed the importance of GPE donors fully delivering on their pledges as agreed upon and called on donors, existing or additional, to provide further contributions. See GPE, "Decision on COVID-19 Increased Allocation" (Meeting of the Board of Directors, May 29, 2020), https://www.globalpartnership.org/content/decision-covid-19-increased-allocation-may-2020. Additional contributions from donors to the GPE COVID-19 funding window include those from Germany (€25 million), Finland (€2 million) and Sweden (SKr 14 million).
5. Eighty-seven countries received COVID-19 response planning grants: 74 partner countries and 13 GPE-eligible countries (but not yet considered partners) at the time of the application. Also, note that the Board extended partnership eligibility to a total of 90 countries (including current partner countries) as of February 2021. See GPE, "Final Decisions" (Meeting of the Board of Directors, November 30–December 3, 2020, BOD/2020/11/12-04), https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/document/file/2020-12-GPE-board-decisions.pdf.
6. The larger allocation is given to countries with larger populations and more decentralized education systems (requiring more extensive engagement processes).
7. The planning grants delivered through UNICEF enabled GPE to reach all partner countries.

GPE'S SUITE OF SPECIAL GRANTS EQUIP COUNTRIES TO RESPOND TO COVID-19.
COVID-19 grants by amount, coverage and purpose

COVID-19 RESPONSE PLANNING GRANTS
> **$8.8 million**
> **87 partner and eligible countries**
> **Grant agent: UNICEF**
> Coordinated education response to the pandemic; communication around safe school operations; and knowledge sharing and capacity-building for the current response and future pandemics
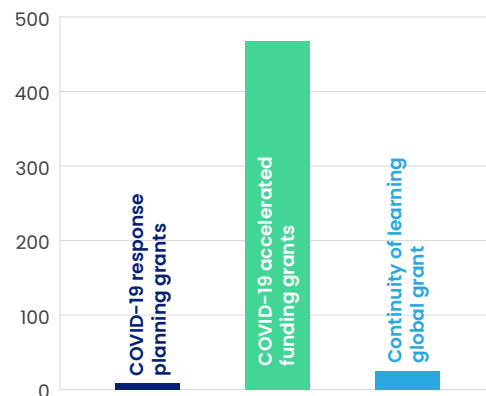
COVID-19 ACCELERATED FUNDING GRANTS
> **$467 million**
> **66 partner countries**
> **Grant agent: varies**
> Implementation of coordinated national COVID-19 mitigation and recovery strategies for education aligned with government priorities

CONTINUITY OF LEARNING GLOBAL GRANT
> **$25 million**
> **48 partner countries piloting, global goods in development**
> **Grant agents: UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank**
> Global and regional coordination; learning continuity at scale for the most marginalized; and monitoring, evidence, learning and preparation for future emergencies

COVID-19 GRANTS (IN US$ MILLIONS)

A.3. COVID-19 ACCELERATED FUNDING GRANTS

To help partner countries mitigate the impact of the pandemic on children's learning and build more resilient education systems, GPE funded 66 COVID-19 accelerated funding grants worth $467 million in 66 partner countries. These grants, ranging in amount from $0.75 million to $20 million, help countries implement coordinated mitigation and recovery strategies aligned with government priorities, with a planned implementation period of 12 to 18 months. See box A.1 for details on how COVID-19 accelerated funding grants complement other country-level responses, as well as the grants' focus on marginalized children. The COVID-19 accelerated funding grants adopted an approval process that contributed to swift delivery of aid to the countries the most in need.

synchronized planning interventions, identifying which activities presented most value for the response at the country level, while at the regional level, UNICEF supported the identification of initiatives to benefit all countries in the region, especially in the areas of technical support, procurement, knowledge management and capacity development.

This funding mechanism used a process that was streamlined and focused on coordination to respond to the crisis in a timely and aligned manner. An analysis of an August 2020 survey completed by UNICEF country offices in all 87 recipient countries found that the activities funded are closely aligned with the planning grants' objectives and original intent. An examination of the activities undertaken also shows that countries' response planning included determining options to address immediate versus longer-term needs, use of evidence, equity focus and inclusiveness of the response process (see box A.2).[8]

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8. This analysis is based on the qualitative comments provided by UNICEF country offices in a survey covering the 87 countries that received COVID-19 response planning grants. Final survey data are as of August 2020. See UNICEF's COVID-19 National Responses in Education: UNICEF Global Tracker. Box A.2 presents data on the three categories of activities most frequently undertaken by countries who received COVID planning funding.

EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES FUNDED BY COVID-19 RESPONSE PLANNING GRANTS

RESPONSE PLANNING AT A NATIONAL OR SUBNATIONAL LEVEL

In addition to response plan development, countries used their planning grants to ensure proper coordination mechanisms between the different stakeholder groups within and beyond education (e.g., Guinea, Indonesia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone), or to conduct rapid assessments on COVID-19-related needs to inform the country planning process (e.g., Ghana, Papua New Guinea, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Tajikistan and Togo, among others).

58 COUNTRIES

PREPARATION OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION DELIVERY SYSTEMS

Countries used planning grants to prepare for the development of new online, TV and radio platforms for remote learning (e.g., Kyrgyz Republic, Samoa, Sudan and Tajikistan), often mobilizing social media. Plans were made to develop new content for distance learning (e.g., "Mon école à la maison" online program in Côte d'Ivoire), often in multiple languages (e.g., radio programs for multilingual early childhood education as well as sign language translation of video lessons in Cambodia). Some countries concentrated their assistance on direct, targeted learning support to the most vulnerable children. These included students with disabilities (e.g., Kyrgyz Republic and Ukraine) or those in rural areas or with limited access to digital, TV or radio platforms (e.g., printed learning packages in Cameroon, El Salvador, Sri Lanka and Sudan; access to devices in Dominica and Liberia).

60 COUNTRIES

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SAFE SCHOOL OPERATIONS

With regards to safe school operations, countries used planning grants to develop protocols for the safe reopening of schools (e.g., Dominica, Grenada, Honduras, Sierra Leone, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines). Countries such as Chad and Nigeria also made plans to supply sanitation and hygiene materials to schools. Under planning for recovery and the reopening of schools, some countries designed plans for reopening "better schools": In Vietnam, for example, the new Opening Up Better Schools initiative integrates gender-based violence components. Indonesia also, for example, developed options for accelerating learning.

39 COUNTRIES

APPLICATION AND APPROVAL PROCESS

GPE recognized the need for rapid response from the onset of the pandemic[9] and adopted a streamlined grant application, review and approval process, tailored specifically for this funding window, so the grants could get approved and disbursed quickly.[10] After the release of the guidelines for this funding window in mid-April 2020,[11] 78 percent of eligible

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9.   GPE, "GPE COVID-19 Response" (Meeting of the Board of Directors, March 31, 2020, BOD/2020/03 DOC 02), https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/document/file/2020-03-GPE-COVID19-response_EN.pdf.

10.   For how the process has been streamlined and accelerated, see GPE, *Grant Status Report 2020* (Washington, DC: Global Partnership for Education, 2020), https://www.globalpartnership.org/content/grant-status-report-2020-novemberdecember-2020.

11.   GPE, *Guidelines for COVID-19 Accelerated Funding Window* (Washington, DC: Global Partnership for Education, 2020), https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/document/file/2020-11-GPE-COVID-19-guidelines.pdf.

A LARGE SHARE OF COVID-19 ACCELERATED FUNDING GRANTS WERE ALLOCATED TO COUNTRIES AND REGIONS WITH HIGHER COVID-RELATED LEARNING LOSSES PREDICTED.

Distribution of approved COVID-19 accelerated funding grants by income, PCFC category and region

Fragility and conflict

PCFCs
$255.3M

55%

Non-PCFCs
$211.9M

45%

Region

SSA
$329.8M

SA
$58.5M

13%

EAP
$43.9M

9%

71%

MENA
$14.5M 3%

LAC
$20.5M 4%

Income category

Low income
$255.6M

55%

Lower middle income
$201.4M

43%

Upper middle income
$10.2M 2%

Category

PCFCs ————— Name of subcategory
$86.7M ————— US$ millions approved

49% ————— Proportion of total approvals
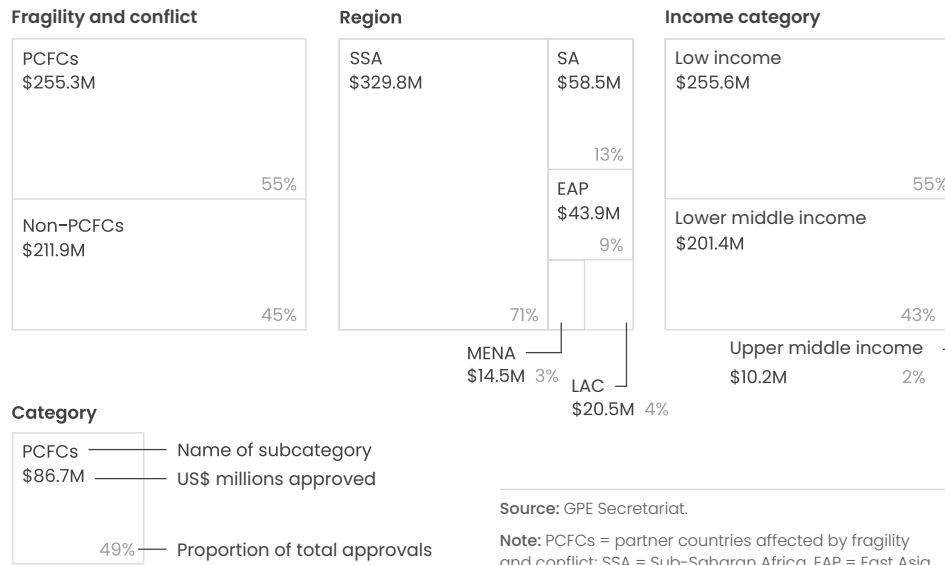
Source: GPE Secretariat.

Note: PCFCs = partner countries affected by fragility and conflict; SSA = Sub-Saharan Africa, EAP = East Asia and Pacific, LAC = Latin America and Caribbean, MENA = Middle East and North Africa, SA = South Asia. Upper middle income countries are mainly GPE partner countries in Small Islands and Landlocked Developing States.

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countries (52 out of 67) submitted their application by the end of May.[12] On average, grant proposals were approved within 32 calendar days after countries submitted their application package to the Secretariat.[13]

Out of 66 grants approved, 41 grants (62 percent) started within a month from the approval as expected for this funding window.[14] This is much shorter than regular implementation grants, which take 5.3 months on average to start implementation after their approval.[15] However, 12 COVID-19 accelerated funding grants took longer than 100 days to start

implementation after approval,[16] mainly owing to external factors such as change or absence of key ministry officials.[17]

COUNTRY COVERAGE

A large share of the COVID-19 accelerated funding grants are allocated to countries and regions that have been the most affected by school closures because of the pandemic (figure A.3). More than half (55 percent) of the total volume of the COVID-19 accelerated funding grants was allocated to PCFCs, home for 60 percent of out-of-school children due

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12. Grant applications were processed and approved on a "first come, first served" basis.
13. Regular accelerated funding grants average approximately 54 days to get approved. This timeline was made possible by the delegation of authority to approve grants to the GPE CEO and a streamlined proposal review process conducted by the Secretariat.
14. COVID-19 accelerated funding grants are expected to become effective within one month of GPE approval. This is included in the program standards for assessment of grant proposals. GPE, *Guidelines for COVID-19 Accelerated Funding Window*.
15. Average of all grants approved between 2016 and 2020, excluding the ones that were pending as of December 2020. It should be noted that the time taken from approval to start date varies greatly among the grants and many factors are at play: for example, grant agent and/or whether there are conditions that countries should fulfill before starting a grant.
16. Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mali, Nepal, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tonga and Yemen.
17. For some countries, issues related to grant agents' internal approval procedure and capacity to start a grant in an emergency context contributed to some delays. The impact of the delayed start was mitigated for some of the World Bank grants through the use of a retroactive financing agreement, which enabled countries to start some activities before the actual start date for the COVID-19 accelerated funding.

LOW-INCOME COUNTRIES PRIMARILY USE RADIO, TV AND PRINTED MATERIALS TO DELIVER DISTANCE LEARNING.

Average proportion allocated to different distance learning modalities, by income category (in percentage)

- Average proportion allocated to printed materials
- Average proportion allocated to radio/TV-based learning
- Average proportion of internet/phone-based learning
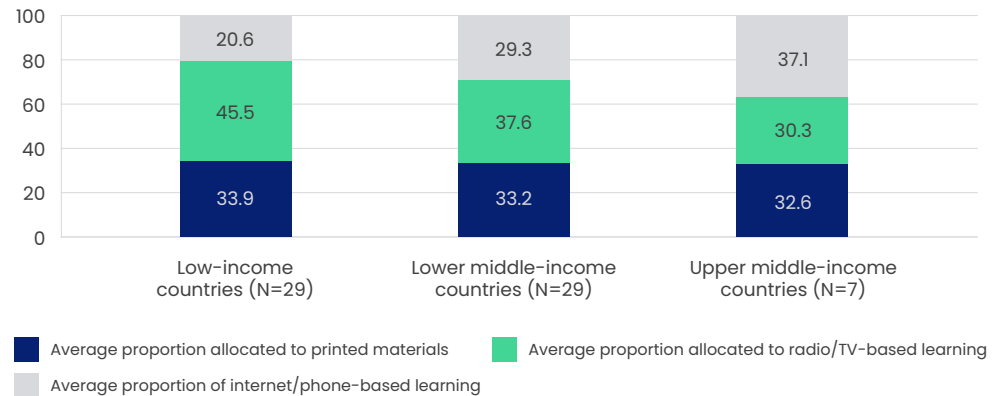
Source: GPE Secretariat.

Note: This figure includes 65 grants that allocated some amount to distance learning.

to the pandemic.[18] According to UNESCO's projection,[19] large shares of learners at risk of not returning to school because of the pandemic are found in South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.[20] These regions will receive 83 percent of the accelerated funding, or $388 million. The same projection found that low-income countries may experience a greater increase of students at risk of dropout because of COVID-19. GPE allocated 55 percent of its COVID-19 accelerated funding, or $256 million, to low-income countries. The remaining portion of funding is going to lower and upper middle-income countries.[21]

ALIGNMENT TO THE GPE 2020 STRATEGIC GOALS

The COVID-19 accelerated funding grants support all three GPE 2020 strategic goals: learning, equity and systems strengthening. Thirty-six percent of grant funds support learning (totaling $162 million), 40 percent support equity ($180 million) and 24 percent support system strengthening ($109 million).[22] Further details on the allocation of COVID-19

grants to different thematic areas can be found in appendix D, and a more in-depth discussion of country-level responses by theme follows in appendix E.[23]

Equitable Learning Outcomes – The COVID-19 accelerated funding grants support a variety of learning-related activities, including distance learning, teachers' development and accelerated learning. For example, to support learning continuity during school closures, all countries with COVID-19 accelerated funding grants (with one exception)[24] support distance learning activities. Upper middle-income countries in general tend to allocate more resources to internet- or phone-based distance learning, while lower middle- and low-income countries seem to invest more in radio, TV and printed materials to provide distance learning (figure A.4). To support teachers during and after school closures, a total of $36.5 million was dedicated to teachers' development activities, including training on remote teaching strategies, psychosocial and mental health support as well as training on how to identify learning gaps and implement catch-up lessons after school reopening. In some countries, the COVID-19

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18. Calculation by GPE Secretariat using the World Bank Education COVID-19 School Closures Map and UIS data on enrollments.
19. UNESCO, "How Many Students Are at Risk of Not Returning to School?" (Advocacy paper, UNESCO, Paris, July 30, 2020), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373992.
20. Some 6.9 million children in pre-primary to lower secondary levels (2.8 million children in South and West Asia and 4.1 million in Sub-Saharan Africa) are at risk of not returning to school, which accounts for 60 percent of children globally at risk of not returning for these education levels.
21. Upper middle-income countries are mostly GPE Small Islands and Landlocked Development States (SILDS) partners.
22. Based on the latest program documents as of March 2020. There will be no new grants for this funding window as it was closed at the end of September 2020.
23. It is important to note that many partner countries were affected by the recent Ebola outbreak in the Sub-Saharan Africa region. Existing evidence, including learning from countries' response to the Ebola crisis, was useful for the design of the GPE-funded interventions.
24. In Afghanistan, distance learning is supported by Education Cannot Wait.

accelerated funding also supports learning assessments systems.[25] A total of $7.5 million has been allocated to support this area, including formative assessment during school closures and the conduct or adaptation of national assessments after school reopening.

Equity, Gender Equality and Inclusion in Access to Education – All COVID-19 accelerated funding grants include support for improving equity and addressing specific disparities identified in each country context. In particular, a total of $98 million is allocated to provide targeted support to marginalized children. As an example, in Sudan, the grant aims to protect vulnerable children—particularly girls—from sexual abuse, violence and pregnancy by using technology to disseminate health messages. It also aims to improve child safeguarding by promoting parents' participation in distance learning, and to ensure that schools are safe when students drop off their assignments.[26] In Zambia, children with special education needs are provided with adapted tablets to access remote learning alongside their peers.[27] Fourteen grants also support refugees or internally displaced persons, for instance, providing additional literacy support to refugee students.[28] To ensure all children return to school when it safely reopens, grants provide targeted support to vulnerable children through school feeding, cash transfers and in-kind support.

Efficient Education Systems – To minimize student dropout, COVID-19 accelerated funding is supporting partner countries to prepare schools for safe reopening. Grants typically finance the construction of WASH (Water, sanitation and hygiene) facilities, disinfection and sanitization of classrooms, and development of guidelines for safe school reopening. Back-to-school campaigns are supported in 79 percent of the grants (52 out of 66). Countries are also taking a variety of measures to provide remedial programs for students at risk of repetition.[29] In response to the need for relevant data necessary to tackle the challenges caused by the pandemic in the education sector, the COVID-19 accelerated funding grants allocated $1.3 million to support activities aiming at strengthening data systems in partner countries.

FUNDING ALLOCATION TO DIFFERENT PHASES OF RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC: MITIGATION AND RECOVERY

Overall, activities funded by the COVID-19 accelerated funding grants are conducted either during the mitigation phase—alleviating negative impacts of the pandemic on education—or in the recovery phase—ensuring all children return to school once it safely reopens and strengthening the resilience of education systems. On average, countries allocated a higher proportion of their grant funds to recovery (51 percent) than mitigation (43 percent). However, the proportion allocated to mitigation and recovery, and to each thematic area, varies by fragility category and income level (figure A.5). While non-PCFCs dedicated a higher share of resources to learning activities during the mitigation phase, PCFCs allocated a higher proportion of funds to equity-related activities in the recovery phase. On average, upper middle-income countries dedicated more than two-thirds (69 percent) of their grants to provide remote learning during school closures in the mitigation phase. On the other hand, in low- and lower middle-income countries a higher proportion of grant funds were allocated to recovery efforts. Among low-income countries, 29 percent of the grant amount was invested in equity-related activities during the recovery phase, making sure all children get back to school once it safely reopens.

OVERALL IMPLEMENTATION STATUS OF COVID-19 ACCELERATED FUNDING GRANTS

To enable a continuous learning from grant implementation and periodical assessment of grant performance, countries and grant agents are required to report on the progress of the COVID-19 accelerated funding on a quarterly basis. As of June 2021, of the 59 grants that had at least one monitoring survey submitted and verified by the Secretariat, the implementation progress was rated as moderately satisfactory or above for 56 grants (95 percent of the grants).[30] Two grants were rated as moderately unsatisfactory and one was rated

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25. This funding for learning assessment systems is only channeled to countries through the COVID-19 accelerated funding grants. Implementation grants also allocated funding to learning assessment systems (see chapter 1). The COVID-19 accelerated funding grants support specific needs around in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the grants support partner countries to monitor and assess student learning during and after the COVID-19-related school closures.

26. For more on this grant, see S. Dhar and C. Valenzuela, "Sudan: The Coronavirus Pandemic Forces Schools to Innovate," *Education for All* (blog), Global Partnership for Education, September 7, 2020, https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/sudan-coronavirus-pandemic-forces-schools-innovate.

27. For more on this grant, see P. Danchev, "Zambia Rises to Meet the Education Challenges Posed by the Coronavirus," *Education for All* (blog), Global Partnership for Education, August 19, 2020, https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/zambia-rises-meet-education-challenges-posed-coronavirus.

28. Afghanistan, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Kenya, Malawi, Myanmar, Somalia–FGS, Somalia–Puntland, Sudan, Uganda and Yemen have planned to support refugees or internally displaced children.

29. Benin, for instance.
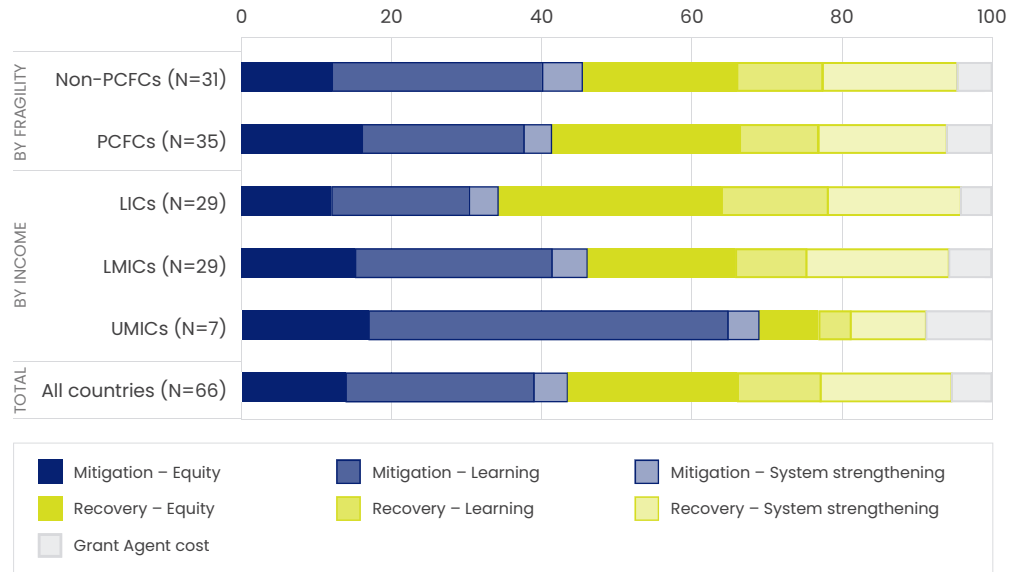
30. Overall grant performance is assessed by taking into consideration the progress of the individual program components, program management, financial management, procurement, monitoring & evaluation, actual disbursement against planned disbursement and is rated as highly satisfactory, satisfactory, moderately satisfactory, moderately unsatisfactory, unsatisfactory and highly unsatisfactory.

WHILE UPPER MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES PRIORITIZE LEARNING DURING MITIGATION PHASE, LOW-INCOME COUNTRIES INVEST IN GETTING ALL CHILDREN BACK TO SCHOOL.

Average proportion of dollar amount allocated to learning, equity and systems during mitigation and recovery phases, by fragility category and by income level

Legend:
- Mitigation – Equity
- Mitigation – Learning
- Mitigation – System strengthening
- Recovery – Equity
- Recovery – Learning
- Recovery – System strengthening
- Grant Agent cost

Source: GPE Secretariat.

Note: Data labels above the bars indicate proportion allocated to mitigation (blue) and recovery (chartreuse). PCFCs = partner countries affected fragility and conflict; LICs = low-income countries, LMICs = lower middle-income countries, UMICs = upper middle-income countries. UMICs are mainly GPE partner countries in Small Islands and Landlocked Developing States.

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as unsatisfactory.[31] These surveys show substantial progress in the key activities for both mitigation and recovery.[32] In the area of mitigation, distance learning activities supported by the grants have reached a total of 40 million children so far. In the area of recovery, 116,000 schools received some support from COVID-19 accelerated funding and successfully reopened.

In terms of financial flow, out of $467 million that was approved, $466 million had already been disbursed to grant agents by June 2021.[33] For the 59 grants with available monitoring data, $188 million[34] (47 percent of the total amount approved for these grants) had been used by the grant agents.[35]

A.4. GLOBAL AND REGIONAL COORDINATION, LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

During the pandemic, GPE has actively leveraged the power of multisector and multi-stakeholder coordination, and nurtured learning and knowledge sharing at the global and country levels to facilitate response and recovery efforts.

CONTINUITY OF LEARNING GLOBAL GRANT

With the aim of helping partner countries adopt evidence-based strategies and measures to respond to the pandemic, GPE provided $25 million to UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank to work together to implement the continuity of learning

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31. Reasons for unsatisfactory ratings include extension of school closure which resulted in postponement of activities planned for after school reopening and limited capacity of staff to follow through the program implementation.
32. The monitoring survey responses are self-reported.
33. A disbursement of US$1 million to OECS is scheduled for July 2021.
34. This is the total amount used as of June 2021 for grants with at least one monitoring survey submitted and verified. It is different from the amount used for COVID-19 accelerated funding grants presented in chapter 5 and appendix J, which show utilization amounts as of June and December 2020.
35. For some countries, activities were progressing despite the apparent low utilization. In fact, some COVID-19 accelerated funding grants with the World Bank as the grant agent use a retroactive financing arrangement, which enables countries to use up to 40 percent of the grant amount up to 12 months before the signing of the financing agreement. For more details, see GPE, *Grant Status Report 2020.*

program. These grant agents were selected after an open invitation was sent to GPE partners. Selecting three grant agents instead of a single one aims to improve coordination in the global education sector response to the pandemic and manage efficiencies in the agencies' efforts.[36]

The grant includes a range of activities focused on three main components: global and regional coordination; learning continuity at scale for the most marginalized; and monitoring, evidence, learning and preparation for future emergencies. The grant targets 48 partner countries for piloting work but will eventually benefit the whole partnership. The grant activities seek to connect with other GPE instruments, including KIX regional hubs, and undertake joint meetings and linked dissemination efforts.

The grant has made satisfactory progress overall toward accomplishing its three components.[37] As of the end of January 2021, the cumulative grant amount used was $8.1 million. Prominent achievements include the launch of the regional online learning platform on quality education resources (Imaginecole);[38] the development of nearly all of the necessary practical resources for countries as part of their Read@Home program;[39] the development of varied guidelines and toolkits, as well as tools for parents on remote learning; and the expansion of the Learning Passport online platform.[40]

OTHER COVID-19-RELATED KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND ADVOCACY ACTIVITIES THROUGH KIX AND EDUCATION OUT LOUD

In November 2020, the GPE Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) launched a new observatory on COVID-19 responses in educational systems in Africa.[41] Funded for a duration of 18 months and with an aim to support continuity of learning approaches, this new observatory collects and disseminates evidence on how GPE partner countries in Africa address system-level challenges owing to the pandemic. For instance, in January 2021, the KIX COVID-19 observatory published a brief on teaching and learner well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.[42] The observatory also gathers evidence on key non-schooling impacts of school closures on the most marginalized children and girls. In addition, the four KIX hubs have organized a number of knowledge exchange events for partner countries.[43]

With GPE support, civil society has adapted to the protracted pandemic. A recent progress report[44] on Education Out Loud implementation shows how civil society stepped up to contribute to the (virtual) knowledge sharing, advocacy and policy development agendas, further advocating for inclusive and quality education.[45] In addition to interventions through KIX and Education Out Loud, GPE has directly engaged country and global actors to ensure that the appropriate tools and knowledge base were being mobilized to fight the crisis together as a partnership.[46]

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36. UNESCO has been leading the interventions related to monitoring, evidence, learning and the preparation for future emergencies, as well as the efforts related to global and regional coordination. UNICEF and the World Bank are co-leading the activities pertaining to learning continuity at scale that reaches the most marginalized children. The grants' total allocation of $25 million was allotted in three tranches to the trio of continuity of learning global grant agents: The first tranche ($7.5 million) was approved in April 2020, the second tranche ($12.5 million) in June and the third tranche ($5 million) in September. An adaptive management approach is embedded in the grant, with the grant's steering committee meeting every six months to examine progress against targets based on the periodic data collection exercises, and to propose tweaks to implementation.

37. As of January 2021, three periodic surveys had been submitted by the grantees on grant implementation progress: two bimonthly progress surveys (July and September, 2020) and one biannual progress survey (November 2020).

38. Imaginecole is a regional online learning platform for 6.6 million Francophone learners in West and Central Africa. See https://imaginecole.africa.

39. Thirteen countries have been selected to participate in the first wave of Read@Home: Cameroon, Djibouti, El Salvador, Honduras, Marshall Islands, Mozambique, Niger, North Macedonia, Philippines, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sudan and Uzbekistan. See https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/read-at-home.

40. The Learning Passport is an online, offline and mobile platform that enables continuous access to quality education. Its flexibility and adaptability allow countries to easily and quickly adopt it as their national learning management system or use it to complement existing digital learning platforms. See https://www.learningpassport.org/.

41. The observatory is led by a consortium composed of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), the African Union's International Centre for Girls' and Women's Education in Africa (AU/CIEFFA) and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). Find more information at https://www.gpekix.org/project/observatory-covid-19-responses-educational-systems-africa.

42. KIX COVID-19 Observatory, *Teaching and Learner Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Washington, DC: Global Partnership for Education, 2021), https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/document/file/2021-02-GPE-KIX-brief-teaching-learner-well-being-covid.pdf.

43. For instance, in November 2020, the KIX Africa 19 hub provided a virtual opportunity for country representatives from Lesotho, Malawi and Sierra Leone to share their teaching/learning responses, challenges and successes with other stakeholders. In February 2021, the KIX Latin America and the Caribbean hub organized a discussion on the post-pandemic challenges and opportunities for education systems in the Eastern Caribbean countries.

44. Education Out Loud, *Status Report July 2020: Interventions in the Face of COVID-19* (Washington, DC: Global Partnership for Education, 2020), https://educationoutloud.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/EOL_StatusReportJuly2020_Web.pdf. See an overview of the findings here: https://educationoutloud.org/status-report-july-2020-interventions-face-covid-19.

45. For example, after conducting a rapid survey on the impact of COVID-19 on education, the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), which is the National Education Coalition in Bangladesh, organized a webinar to contribute to policy dialogue on inclusive and quality education. This webinar involved about 120 individuals, including senior government officials, legislators, think tanks and civil society organizations. CAMPE then built on their webinar's momentum by subsequently reaching out to the government with concrete requests related, among others, to education financing and a new recovery plan.

46. These engagements included a virtual ministerial-level dialogue in May 2020 on learning from Sierra Leone's experience responding to the Ebola crisis, a series of workshops with 13 partner countries in October 2020 on longer-term scenario planning and on the simulation of the potential impact of COVID-19 on education systems, and a dialogue with UNICEF as well as other partners (including Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USAID and WHO Africa) around preparations for school reopening and safety in early 2021.

BOX A.3. AN EARLY EVALUATION OF GPE'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

Suitability of GPE support and grant application mechanisms: GPE funding was deemed to be available in a timely fashion, with an average of 32 calendar days between application submission and approval. As a stakeholder noted, "GPE filled a big hole … it was done quickly and efficiently." A number of factors enabled this efficiency, including the advantage of an accelerated grant funding mechanism already in place at GPE as well as the quality of the applications received, in part due to sufficient capacity of stakeholders and institutions at the country level. GPE's COVID-19 funding guidance, standards and replicable/traceable processes also helped partners to submit efficient, relevant and high-quality grant applications. Another key strength of the grant process was its flexibility, which was appreciated by partners and appropriate to the changing nature of both the pandemic and country needs. Further, the multi-stakeholder nature of the GPE operating model allowed for the strengths of many organizations to be brought together to support partner countries, with governments empowered to take ownership of the process. Though the initial first-come-first-served funding approach was not perceived as an appropriate strategy, the subsequent needs-based approach was welcomed. Finally, the importance of GPE's requirements for reliable and timely data and accountability was acknowledged, although stakeholders wished for a better balance between these requirements and context-focused reporting.

Type and relevance of interventions: Mitigation and recovery represented 39 percent and 61 percent of costed interventions, respectively. There was a particular spotlight on information and communications technology across country grants, although contextual challenges (for example, access to electricity, internet) impacted the implementation of related initiatives. GPE's grant requirement for a clear and comprehensive COVID-19 national response plan supported a cohesive approach from country partners. The pandemic did, however, highlight the already recognized weaknesses within the education systems and beyond, and catalyzed the need to address these—for example, gender and other forms of marginalization. The pandemic also emphasized the need for systems to be able to adapt to and prepare for other crises in the future. On a positive note, GPE support appeared to moderately aid some countries' system strengthening and long-term capacity building. Indeed, COVID-19 accelerated funding grants bridged an important gap: addressing immediate emergency needs and ensuring the safe return to school allowed the ongoing (other) GPE grants to remain focused on longer-term education goals.

Efficiency and (early) effectiveness of grant implementation: Most GPE COVID-19 accelerated funding grants started implementation within a month from approval. Where grants took longer to implement, external factors such as issues with procurement, government restructuring or extended school closures were involved. As of the end of May 2021, 56 grants had a progress rating of moderately satisfactory or above, and 3 grants a rating of moderately unsatisfactory or below. Meanwhile, 100 percent of funding had been disbursed (from GPE to grant agents) and 47 percent used (from grant agent to grant recipient). Of note is that several innovative practices and successes began to emerge across key areas (namely, learning outcomes, access to education, gender equality, teachers and the quality of teaching), while innovative partnerships with the private sector were also leveraged. Further, GPE support encouraged global, regional and national coordination as well as the sharing of learning and knowledge among partners, although cross-sectoral engagement remained limited and there was a lack of community engagement in some contexts. There is also a need to further examine differences between provision of services and whether or not they are used, and the actual reach of, and children's learning stemming from, GPE interventions.

LOOKING AHEAD

As partner countries weather the remainder of the COVID-19 pandemic and move into the recovery phase, the whole of the partnership will remain dedicated to supporting them to maintain resilient education systems and make up lost ground in equitable access and learning. An evaluation report on GPE's support during the COVID crisis will be published in the third quarter of 2021. This report will depict not only how the partnership has supported countries in responding to the pandemic and addressing its lingering effects on equitable access and education quality, but also what can be learned with regard to longer-term system resilience and adaptability to shocks and crises (see box A.3).