

UNDRR & CDEMA
COVID-19 BRIEF

COVID-19, Systemic Risk and Education Sector Resilience in the Caribbean Region

28 May, 2020

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COVID-19
RESPONSE

SCOPE OF WORK AND BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has served to reveal the systemic nature of risk and highlights the exposure of these systems to all hazards. Its unprecedented cascading effects have impacted all sectors and levels of our economies and societies. The Global Assessment Report 2019 (GAR) and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction convey the reality that in an ever more populous, networked, and globalizing society, the very nature and scale of risk have changed, to such a degree that it surpasses established risk management institutions and approaches.

The Caribbean region is experiencing the effects of systemic risk as we witness the interplay and amplification of the varied effects of multiple events. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a direct impact on the education systems of all countries in the region. Education systems have been responding to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, but they are also preparing and implementing actions to mitigate the potential consequences of the upcoming hurricane season—expected to be more active than usual—and other potential hazards, such as earthquakes and tsunamis.

Governments in the region are facing challenges with limited capacity to respond and they are now using the instruments that they have available to secure school safety. The lack of specific preparedness measures to face pandemics during the hurricane season has led to improvisation and real-time testing of policies and measures.

In this context, the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA)—with the support of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), Regional Office for the Americas and the Caribbean and on behalf of the Safe School Working Group of the Education Sector Sub-Committee of the Comprehensive Disaster Management Coordination and Harmonization Council—has organized the webinar: “COVID-19, Systemic Risk and Education Sector Resilience in the Caribbean Region” with the aim to:

- Provide a snapshot of the regional Caribbean perspective during the COVID-19 crisis considering the challenges faced by the Hurricane season.
- Assess how existing safe school tools can be useful for the current crisis, and provide recommendations for their application.
- Share country experiences on how the education sector is facing the pandemic.
- Share practical elements for safe schools in times of COVID-19 from a global perspective.
- Reflect on lessons learned and recommendations for sector response and recovery as it relates to a global pandemic.

PANELISTS

- **Moderator—Dr. Jair Torres:** Consultant at the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, Regional Office for the Americas and the Caribbean.
- **Saskia Carusi:** External Relations Officer at the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, Regional Office for the Americas and the Caribbean.
- **Dr. Kerry Ann Thompson:** Senior Programme Officer, Safe Schools, Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency.
- **Dr. Idelia Ferdinand:** Senior Education Officer, with responsibilities for school safety at the Ministry of Education, National Reconciliation and Information, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. **Dr. Joy St. John:** Executive Director of the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA).
- **Dr. Marla Petal:** Principal Advisor Urban Resilience and School Safety at Save The Children.

SYSTEMIC RISK: CASCADE EFFECTS & IMPACTS ON THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented global shock to education systems simultaneously: 98.6% of the world student population was out of school at various points; several examinations were canceled or delayed; challenges with distance learning mechanisms emerged; and student debts and loan payments were impacted. This reaffirms the GAR message that “surprise is the new normal” considering the ways in which the dynamic changes due to a single hazard has affected multiple layers of society and systems.

The COVID-19 health pandemic affected education systems with the closing of schools, which in turn impacted the economic situation of households who have to care of children at home. In addition to this, negative effects have been observed on the nutritional status of vulnerable children, their psychosocial wellbeing, the increased exposure to exploitation and abuse—and last but not least—an evident impact on the learning process.

The future is uncertain as to when the pandemic will be under control, and when would be the most suitable period for lifting the lockdown and commencing the recovery phase. As recovery plans and other instruments are being designed by national and regional entities, they present an opportunity to reiterate the value of education in building resilient societies, and the need for multisectoral, multi-stakeholder, and regional coordination through mechanisms which as the Caribbean Safe School Initiative.

The dynamics of disasters are changing, fueled by the amplification of inequalities and pre-existing, never-solved vulnerabilities. Disaster experiences and recovery are shaped by pre-disaster conditions, so it is through the reduction of inherent vulnerabilities that efforts should be focused.

POLICY CONTEXT: THE CARIBBEAN SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE

In recognizing the need for true regional coordination across multiple sectors as a means of managing systemic risk, the Caribbean Safe School Initiative (CSSI) was established in 2017. Regionally, eighteen countries and overseas territories have signaled their commitment to the principles and directives of the CSSI through the signing of the Antigua and Barbuda Declaration on School Safety, at the First Ministerial Forum on School Safety in 2017 and at the Second Ministerial Forum on School Safety in 2019. The implementation of the CSSI is guided by a commonly-agreed Regional Roadmap for school safety, which is rooted in the global Comprehensive School Safety Framework, and contributes to the Worldwide Initiative for Safe Schools (WISS). The priorities defined within the Regional Roadmap set the path to achieve the policies enabling safe school programming and budgeting, and also provide tools that support standard practices, while promoting partnerships for advancing safe school implementation at national and regional levels.

The policy principles being implemented in the Caribbean region, and that drive the CSSI, cover a range of issues relevant to the actual COVID-19 context, such as the safety in learning facilities, education emergency planning (including education continuity and protocols), and health considerations such as the important role of water, sanitation and hygiene. These principles call for equity in access and participation for all students, boys, and girls, and also address emerging policy issues, such as psychological, social, and behavioral issues.

However, at this stage, there is a range of policy instruments, such as legislative acts, plans, and policies that may be considered for amendment, so that they can better incorporate biological and anthropogenic hazards. This in order to provide and/or strengthen these instruments and their tools, to better prepare, mitigate, respond and recover, not only for biological hazards (such as COVID-19), but for all other hazards that may produce compounded effects over time.

Amongst the policy instruments contributing to CSSI, CDEMA's Council has endorsed the Model Safe School Policy, which has a vision to create a safe, sustainable and secure environment for learning and play for children and school administrators in CDEMA Participating States. It provides the context for the amendment of existing national legislations aiming to integrate disaster risk reduction and environmental protection measures in the Education Sector. It has provided guidance for the development of national system policies in at least five CDEMA participating states: Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

Accompanying these policies, there are a number of existing tools aiming to support the advancement of the CSSI. Among them there are the Technical Support Package for the CSSI, and the Model Safe School Program Assessment Tool. The Technical Support Package includes a considerable number of validated resources for “School Safety” implementation actions such as guidelines for: enabling the necessary institutional environment; child-centered multi-hazard assessment; safe learning facilities assessment; minimum requirements for design and construction of schools; development of school safety plans (at sectorial and school levels); and mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in the school curricula, among other resources.

The Model Safe School Program Assessment Toolkit allows the evaluation of the level of safety and greenness of schools. This toolkit comprises a series of instruments that can be adopted by governments, notably at Ministries of Education: tools for assessing the level of safety and greenness of schools; a template for development an Emergency/Disaster Plan which can be adapted to specific schools and hazard contexts; and finally, a list of tools and guidance documents that can be utilized to create safer and greener institutions. Its electronic interface allows for the harmonized collection of multiple datasets on safety issues, both at national and regional level. The data can be aggregated and analyzed with the aim of identifying patterns and gaps.

[Download the Model Safe School Program Assessment Toolkit](#)

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the framework of the CSSI, these policies and tools are being tested and it is expected that further analysis will be performed in order to incorporate elements related to biological and anthropogenic hazards.

PRACTICES EMERGING FROM COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

The Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Case Study

The Ministry of Education, National Reconciliation, and Information of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines shared its national response to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Its response was mainly guided by its national school safety policy and related plans.

In order to secure education continuity and aiming to secure sustained engagement of students, a wide range of virtual platforms were tested by selected schools. After a consultation process a common online platform was adopted. Training on the different modalities for online teaching, including the efficient use of the platform, was provided to school staff, and an eLearning help desk to address queries was established. In addition, live classes were broadcasted on television and radio stations, as well as through social media sites, such as Facebook. When online learning was not possible, due to lack of Information Technology (IT) devices, access to internet, weak electricity connection, or other unexpected issues, the "School in a Bag" initiative was implemented with materials printed, packed, and made available to the students. Outreach to students who were still not engaged by principals, teachers, and other education officers was also carried out.

In parallel with efforts to ensure education continuity, psychosocial support was organized through counselors for individual students and staff. The Curriculum Development Unit of the Ministry also provided support and guidance to students through WhatsApp groups, online parenting sessions, and helpline appointments.

Schools reopened on Monday, May 25, 2020. This was possible due to the application of the protocols established by the National COVID-19 Task Force, which were largely consulted in preparatory meetings with key stakeholders. In addition to this, a detailed assessment of school facilities was performed, and specific interventions were made prior to the reopening of schools. Interventions included: cleaning and sanitization of all learning facilities (as well as providing guidance to cleaners); installation of additional hand washing stations and drinking fountains at some schools; and identification of isolation rooms, if needed. Moreover, physical distancing protocols were set up such as: the required use of face masks; the requirement of student attendance on alternate days; the regulated participation of students in breaks; the limiting of attendance of secondary students for timetabled subjects only; the utilization of school buses and dedicated transportation designated exclusively for staff and students; the establishment of food arrangements for feeding programs; and a continued sensitization campaign of health and safety practices aiming to prevent COVID-19 contagion.

Among the lessons learned in this process, it is key to highlight: 1) the importance of improving mechanisms for blended learning (physical and virtual); 2) the need to incorporate electronic and online media, and face-to-face teaching/learning more effectively in the education sector strategies; and 3) the importance of developing online teaching/learning protocols, reliable internet, and IT devices to support blended learning.

The current crisis highlighted the importance of engagement at all levels of school safety with increased investment in human and financial resources, as well as, the imperative required to ensure that all education institutions develop, update, disseminate and test disaster management, school safety and contingency plans.

Managing information flows and conducting regular meetings with key stakeholders have also proved to be key elements in emergency situations. Similarly, detailed assessments, and the storage and management of survey data is critical, not only for operations in normal times, but also to inform in a quick and efficient manner decision-making processes in times of emergencies.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

COVID-19 presents a meaningful case study for policy research into impacts on and efforts to safeguard educational attainment in a distance learning environment.

Considerations for School-Related Public Health Measures in the context of Covid-19 to keep students and educators safe from death, injury, and harm in schools by:

- Ensure that local information is accessible and reliable, and understand the COVID-19 contagion trends in specific areas.
- Strengthen the school's capacity to maintain appropriate collaboration and coordination with local public health authorities, (e.g. provide public health officers with the information needed to trace contacts if a case or outbreak occurs in the school).
- Identify and map children with underlying conditions or special needs, as well as educational staff at risk for severe disease (age-groups and underlying conditions).
- Secure special transportation arrangements to reduce exposure. Ensure that daily mechanisms are in place for monitoring staff and children who may become ill (for example, temperature screening); and ensure that staff and children are equipped with hand sanitizers and masks.
- Ensure that deep cleaning and sanitization is done prior to reopening schools; and install additional stations of running water for regular hand washing.
- Be prepared to adjust the school schedule to accommodate new mitigating measures.
- Explore formalized after-school programs with trusted providers.
- Put in place social distancing Measures such as the arrangement of desks at least 6 feet apart; avoiding any non-essential assemblies and ensuring that during persons lunch eat in the classroom instead of the cafeteria.
- Double or triple the stated measures for special education situations.
- Ensure that all measures are communicated clearly to parents/guardians considering the expectations of parents, students, and schools; and ensure that parents receive instructions regarding reporting illness and travel history to school.
- Develop a decision model for closing and reopening schools as needed due to the resurgence of community transmission.
- Coordinate with National Teachers Unions and PTAs re contingency measures for outbreaks of illness in staff or students.

Continuity of education through all expected hazards and threats

- Ensure that virtual platform resources for learning are available to staff and students and that all students have access to education (leave no one behind).
- Review online teaching and exam options.
- Continue blended learning, by trying to adopt emerging technologies and other modalities that facilitate learning, especially in times of crisis.
- Use new approaches to teaching by boosting creativeness.
- Manage school-based and national assessment methods.
- Adapt and revamp current curriculum in order to integrate all-hazards, and be ready to develop a minimum curriculum adapted for emergency situations.
- Explore opportunities for strengthening education continuity with consideration for pandemic and biological hazards integration.
- Understand how current and emergent practices in ensuring education continuity for the most vulnerable might be recorded, assessed, adapted, replicated, and integrated into existing policies and strategies.
- Determine critical levels of staff required to keep the schools open.

Support from regional partners

The COVID-19 experience gives rise to some considerations for our partners throughout the region, including:

- Support to partners, as they must recognize their role in mobilizing resources to ensure effective advancement of the Caribbean Safe School Initiative and promote synergies as a commitment to energize efforts in advocating for political support.
- Fast-track the development of the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting Framework for School Safety.
- Strengthening the relationship between regional and national governance mechanisms allowing the sharing of good practices.
- Strengthening emphasis on biological, anthropogenic and other threats in assessments, policy, and contingency planning for the education sector, where needed.

Strengthened school preparedness and education resilience

- Plan for business continuity and distance learning protocols to access virtual platforms.
- Implement strategies aiming to close the digital gap and provide students with resources to manage learning gaps.
- Provide clear risk communication and information to influence the preventive behaviors of school communities.
- Provide financial and dietary support to marginalized students. Secure psychosocial support for students, teachers and administrative personnel at schools.
- Provide continuous teacher orientation and professional development support.
- For institutions with residential facilities/health stations, ensure there are guidelines for managing illness, quarantine, reporting illness to the Ministry of Health for staff and students.
- Be informed about measures being implemented in other countries, and promote regional protocols. Secure coordination and consultations with Teachers Unions.
- Strengthen governance mechanisms of intersectoral coordination at all levels.
- Update policies and plans to consider biological hazards with a multi-hazards approach based on risk information and knowledge.

Back to normal is not good enough; we must recover and build back better:

- Consider wellbeing when reopening, as well as protection, policy frameworks, financing opportunities, safe operations, reaching the most vulnerable, and learning.
- Consider safety protocols for teachers and students.
- Prepare for the double impact of climate-related and/or geological events. Guarantee education sector investments are safeguarded.
- Create more inclusive education systems moving from crisis to opportunity.
- Prevent student drop-off and student loss especially of poor households.
- Prevent education service reduction of demand and supply.

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Recommendations from the Comprehensive School Safety Framework (CSSF) for COVID-19:

Policy and Enabling Environment:

- The CSSF is clear on indicating an all-hazards approach with multi-hazard risk assessments to inform education sector policies and plans, and which consider biological and anthropogenic metabolism hazards.

Pillar 1 – Safer School Facilities:

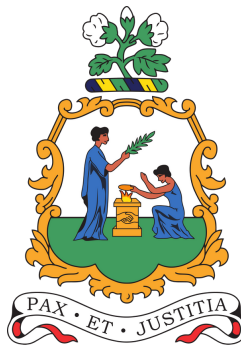
- Limited use of schools as temporary shelters or as collection, isolation, testing, and voting centers while maintaining educational continuity plans.
- If school facilities are used, they must be cleaned up and decontaminated prior to being utilized for education purposes.
- WASH facilities must be improved as a key life-saving measure.
- An appropriate school budget for maintenance must be available.

Pillar 2 – School Safety Management:

- Prepare for an efficient response and recovery which cover many elements to be ready in order to manage a critical hazardous situation.
- Take care of teacher's wellbeing with clear information, protection, and support for mental health in the light of COVID-19.

Pillar 3 – Risk Reduction & Resilience Education:

- Develop a minimum curriculum to be followed under particular conditions.
- Support children and family activities with games, wellness exercises, acts of kindness, and disaster preparedness games.



CARIBBEAN SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE (CSSI)

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