

Education Systems Response to COVID-19: Reflections on the Contributions of Research to USAID’s Education and Resilience Agenda

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EDUCATION SYSTEMS RESPONSE TO COVID-19: REFLECTIONS ON THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF RESEARCH TO USAID’S EDUCATION AND RESILIENCE AGENDA

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems have grappled with the complexity of protecting the wellbeing of learners and educators, along with ensuring learners’ continued engagement with learning. This has led to an increasing number of calls to strengthen education-sector resilience to future shocks and stressors, particularly for the most marginalized, in order to maintain momentum toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4. Resilience has been and continues to be a key focal point for the US Agency for International Development (USAID), both across the agency and within its education portfolio. In this paper, we reflect on case study research in five contexts—Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia—during the COVID-19 pandemic and apply it to USAID’s resilience framework for education. We identify practices and structures used in each context that were either operationalized or could be leveraged further to absorb, adapt, and ultimately transform these education systems when facing a pandemic and other types of stressors and shocks.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems worldwide have grappled with the complex task of protecting learners and educators from health-related risks, while also ensuring students' continued engagement with learning during the recurring school closures. Longer-term recovery efforts focus on returning to in-person learning, addressing learning loss, and meeting learners' needs to ensure their psychosocial wellbeing. National education authorities and institutions also hope to learn from the response to COVID-19 in order to improve preparedness and minimize future disruptions to the provision of education. Hence, since March 2020, a central discourse has emerged within the international community on the need to build back better and strengthen education-sector resilience beyond the immediate effects of a pandemic.

For the US Agency for International Development (USAID), strengthening individual, household, community, and system resilience has been and continues to be a key focus across the agency and in its education portfolio. The *USAID Policy Framework* (2019) stresses the importance of a resilience-focused approach to programming in order to ensure that its investments are not compromised by complex crises and natural disasters. Strengthening resilience by building capacity across the various levels of a system is considered vital to enabling partner countries to prevent, mitigate, and recover from crises that might otherwise set them back (USAID 2018).

In 2019, USAID published a white paper articulating the bidirectional relationship between resilience and education outcomes, and the implications for education programming (Shah 2019). The white paper acknowledged common critiques of resilience; namely, unclear definitions and its confusion with the concept of self-reliance (O'Malley 2010; Mitchell 2013). Resilience is becoming an increasingly commonplace objective in the education in emergencies (EiE) community, but often with poorly defined parameters (Shah, Paulson, and Couch 2019). The white paper therefore emphasized that improving and sustaining education outcomes are the ultimate goals of resilience, and that resilience must be seen as a process rather than an end state.

COVID-19 provided an opportunity for USAID to test the principles and framing of education-sector resilience outlined in the white paper. Using five country case studies conducted between September 2020 and April 2021, we explore in this field note what we have learned about the dynamics of resilience and its relation to COVID-19. While the case studies were initially conceptualized to track how

national education systems supported learning continuity and a return to learning following the closure of education facilities, it became clear while analyzing these responses that the white paper helped us understand what was occurring and why. Our research plan, implementation, and analysis were adapted to produce findings and recommendations that were most relevant to USAID, and to the national, regional, and local actors in each context.

In this field note, we begin by tracing USAID’s conceptualization of the education-resilience relationship and how it has become a concept that guides the agency’s work in the education sector. Next, we briefly describe how the case study research was carried out and initially analyzed based on the principles of the USAID Return to Learning Toolkit. Using the data generated by the case studies, we then apply concepts taken from the white paper to demonstrate the interrelationships between COVID-19 as an acute shock turned stressor to education systems, and the subsequent ways these dynamics shaped a system’s ability to respond in ways that either mitigated or exacerbated existing educational vulnerabilities. Finally, we explore whether and how institutional responses (1) recognized and capitalized on existing strengths and capacities in the system, and (2) identified opportunities to further catalyze actions that were locally led during COVID-19 that could support systems-level transformation over the long term.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE EDUCATION-RESILIENCE CONNECTION: USAID’S JOURNEY, 2012-2020

USAID’s 2012 resilience policy (USAID 2012) recognized that recurrent crises were leading to ever-increasing humanitarian needs, eroding development gains, and limiting sustainable and inclusive growth in USAID partner countries. USAID defines resilience as “the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth” (9). This definition emphasizes that developing greater resilience is a way to achieve sectoral development outcomes and reduce humanitarian needs over the long term. Initially, USAID’s resilience programming was focused on increasing food security in response to drought and targeted drought-prone regions in Africa. Over time, the uptake and understanding of USAID’s resilience policy expanded beyond the food-security sector to influence policies and programming in other

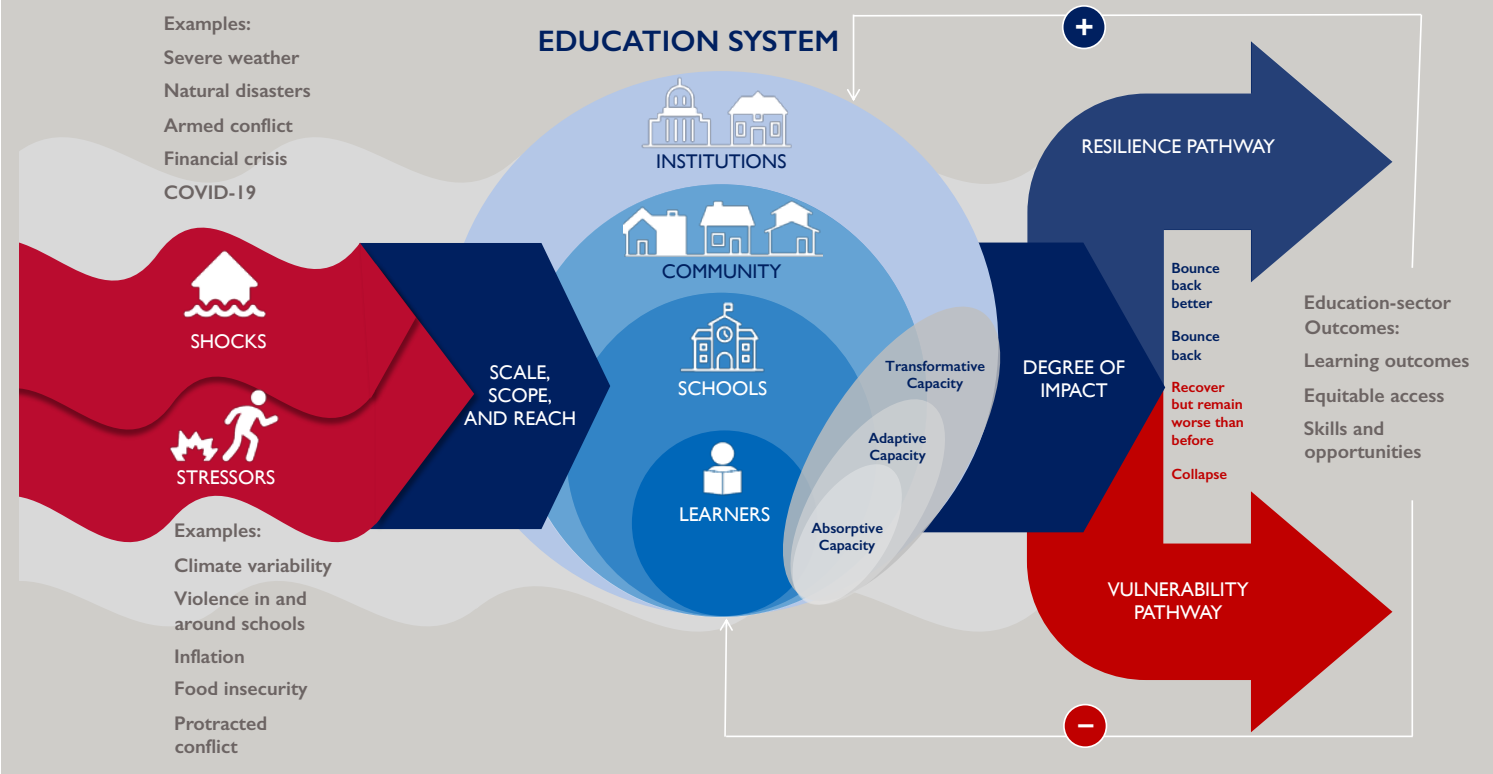
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sectors, including health and education (e.g., *USAID Education Policy*; USAID 2018). This led to the institutionalization of resilience at USAID with the release of the 2019 *USAID Policy Framework*. Meanwhile, the uptake of resilience approaches in USAID's education sector was largely motivated by research on poverty “escape routes,” which found that the education level of the head of household was a source of resilience, particularly in accessing secondary education and for women (Diwakar, Eichsteller, and Shepherd 2021). At that time, USAID was shifting its focus to address underlying vulnerabilities and promote inclusive growth through actions that help households, communities, and institutions minimize exposure to, adapt to, and recover from the shocks and stressors they face.

At the same time, the international development landscape was moving toward a renewed call to improve the coherence of humanitarian and development assistance, including in the education sector. This movement was championed at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, which recognized that crises were affecting a record number of people globally each year (UNOCHA 2016). New evidence concurrently demonstrated the links between inequitable access to quality education and the likelihood of violent conflict and household vulnerability (Omoeva, Hatch, and Moussa 2016; Cooke 2015). Concepts originating in the disaster risk reduction literature were brought into conversation with humanitarian and development programming under the labels of preparedness, response, and recovery from crises. These developments led a range of organizations to embrace a focus on resilience in education programming across the humanitarian-development nexus, as they began to note its appeal in protecting and mitigating against known risk factors.

In 2018, USAID commissioned the drafting of a white paper to adapt the conceptual framework of resilience to the USAID education sector. The white paper provided an evidence-based case for greater investment in education, due to its potential to address the root causes of vulnerability and to promote transformative development. Specific attributes of education—such as its capacity to affect populations at scale, the demand for it from crisis-affected populations, and the portability of the skills and dispositions it provides—were also noted. The white paper presented a framework for understanding how resilience operates in the education sector, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Resilience and Education Framework



Source: Adapted from Shah (2019)

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First, the white paper noted the interdependent nature between shocks—which are short-term, acute deviations from long-term development trends—and stressors—which are chronic, long-term pressures that undermine the stability of the system. Shocks often occur alongside stressors in EiE contexts, which compounds pre-existing risk factors for vulnerable learners and communities and reduces the system's potential to maintain education outcomes during prolonged crises. Second, the white paper made it clear that shocks and stressors are not experienced uniformly across a population; they vary according to the level of exposure and the population's sensitivity to them. Sensitivity is shaped by individual, household, community, and institutional characteristics that either reduce or increase the impact of uniform risk exposure on individuals or population groups. This influences their ability to deploy resilience strategies and leads to differential educational outcomes. Third, the white paper identified resilience capacities as the types of assets, skills, resources, and networks that are used to anticipate and deal with exposure to a combination of shocks and stressors, and to reduce overall sensitivity and vulnerability to these risks. Resilience capacities take three forms:

- Absorptive capacities, which are used to minimize exposure and sensitivity to shocks and stressors through coping strategies and risk-mitigation measures in an attempt to prevent permanent, deleterious impacts
- Adaptive capacities, which are used to make choices or pivot strategies in response to longer-term shocks or stressors in order to improve wellbeing outcomes
- Transformative capacities, which enable conditions for systemic change to occur through governance structures, funding mechanisms, policies and regulations, and norms and structures, and also facilitate long-term resilience at the individual, household, and community levels

Fourth, the white paper noted that, in any given crisis, these capacities can and should function concurrently. Because resilience manifests through social processes (i.e., the socioecological framing at the center of Figure 1), there is a critical need for the nested capacities and responses of individuals, communities, and institutions to be connected through effective governance, coordination, communication, and partnership mechanisms. A particular action, relationship, network, or resource is only an effective resilience capacity when an enabling environment exists and endures. It is the relationship between a particular set of shocks and stressors, a population's exposure to them, and the capacities that are leveraged across an

education system in response that determines whether education and wellbeing outcomes are maintained, improved, or suffer (Béné et al. 2016).

The white paper was a first step toward institutionalizing a resilience-focused approach across USAID’s education programming. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the USAID Center for Education identified an opportunity to apply concepts from the white paper. It developed the Return to Learning Toolkit, which highlights “how short-term responses can contribute to building transformative resilience capacities both during and after a crisis” and identifies opportunities to build resilience capacities through crisis-response planning and implementation (Boisvert, Weisenhorn, and Bowen 2020).

CASE STUDY RESEARCH: TRACING THE RETURN-TO-LEARNING PROCESS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

In September 2020, the USAID Center for Education commissioned a set of case studies to document localized actions undertaken by education system actors between March 2020 and April 2021. The intention was to document the process by which education authorities navigated school reopenings during or after the prolonged crisis created by COVID-19. Within this study, attention was given to how and with what effect countries (1) reached and retained marginalized populations; (2) adapted instructional time, curriculum, and learning support; (3) modified exams and learner promotion practices; and (4) re-engaged and prepared infrastructure for a safe, equitable, and inclusive return to learning.

Beyond this, USAID sought to understand how useful the *Return to Learning Framework* (Boisvert et al. 2020) was for conceptualizing, planning, and implementing the education response to COVID-19. What became clear once the research commenced and subsequent waves of COVID-19 led to recurrent disrupted education was that many elements of the *Return to Learning Framework* were not well suited to such a dynamic context. It was then that the explanatory potential of the *Education and Resilience Framework* (Shah 2019) became more resonant, particularly in terms of understanding outcomes and lessons learned from this period.

Case study research was conducted in Zambia, Lebanon, Nigeria, Colombia, and Georgia.¹ These countries were purposefully selected to provide a diverse range of contexts in terms of geographic location, other known preexisting risk factors,

¹ Full case study reports for each country, as well as the *Synthesis Report*, can be accessed at <https://www.eccnetwork.net/resources/resilience-return-learning-case-studies>.

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and previous experience with and response to crises. The researchers collaborated closely with the USAID Center for Education, and with the USAID Mission in each country. The research team consisted of four global-level and one in-country researcher per site.²

Data collection was carried out between December 2020 and April 2021 using two methods: (1) ongoing review of country-level documentation (official national reports, strategies, and policies published between March 2020 and April 2021); and (2) four waves of primary data collection through key informant interviews with actors in the education sector, which focused mainly on institutional-level planning, decisionmaking, and processes. The in-country researcher conducted these interviews with representatives of government agencies, donor agencies, universities, local and international nongovernmental organizations (I/NGOs), civil society organizations, and the private sector. At the end of each wave, the global and country researchers and the USAID team came together to discuss and review the emerging findings. After each workshop, lines of inquiry for the subsequent wave of data collection were agreed to, based on emerging areas of interest. In total, 234 interviews were conducted across the five countries, as per Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Interviewees for Study

	Colombia	Georgia	Lebanon	Nigeria	Zambia	TOTAL
Government officials	14	22	14	8	6	64
Donors	2	3	9	5	4	23
UN or World Bank	1	2				3
International and local NGOs	7	8	9	7	13	46
Civil society	12	8		5	5	22
Private-sector education actors	5			3		8
Principals, teachers		14	38			52
TOTAL	43	57	70	27	37	234

² Research protocols reflected a “do no harm” principle, informed consent was obtained for all interviews, and confidentiality was upheld in all reporting. Ethical protocols for the research were agreed to and approved by USAID.

In analyzing the data for each case study, we first mapped out the ways COVID-19 interacted with the pre-existing stressors and shocks the education system was facing. We then documented national-level responses against each of the five return-to-learning priorities presented in the USAID toolkit.³ We explored the outcomes of these decisions, particularly in terms of ensuring equitable and inclusive access to education, supporting learners' wellbeing, enabling learners' continuity of learning with minimal learning loss, and building the overall resilience of the education system. A synthesis report was produced from these case studies, which assessed whether and how the *Education and Resilience Framework* could help USAID and other education actors understand and explain what was observed across the five countries (see Heaner et al. 2021). In the remainder of this field note, we focus on the conclusions made based on this report.

RESILIENCE, EDUCATION SYSTEMS, AND COVID-19

Across the five case study countries, large variations in the response to COVID-19 were noted during the research timeframe. Many of these differences can be understood by how COVID-19 interacted with the other shocks and stressors these countries were facing, the degree to which exposure and sensitivity to COVID-19 was accounted for in the decisionmaking process, and the education system's ability to leverage pre-COVID-19 capacities and afford space for emergent capacities to respond quickly or innovatively to localized needs.

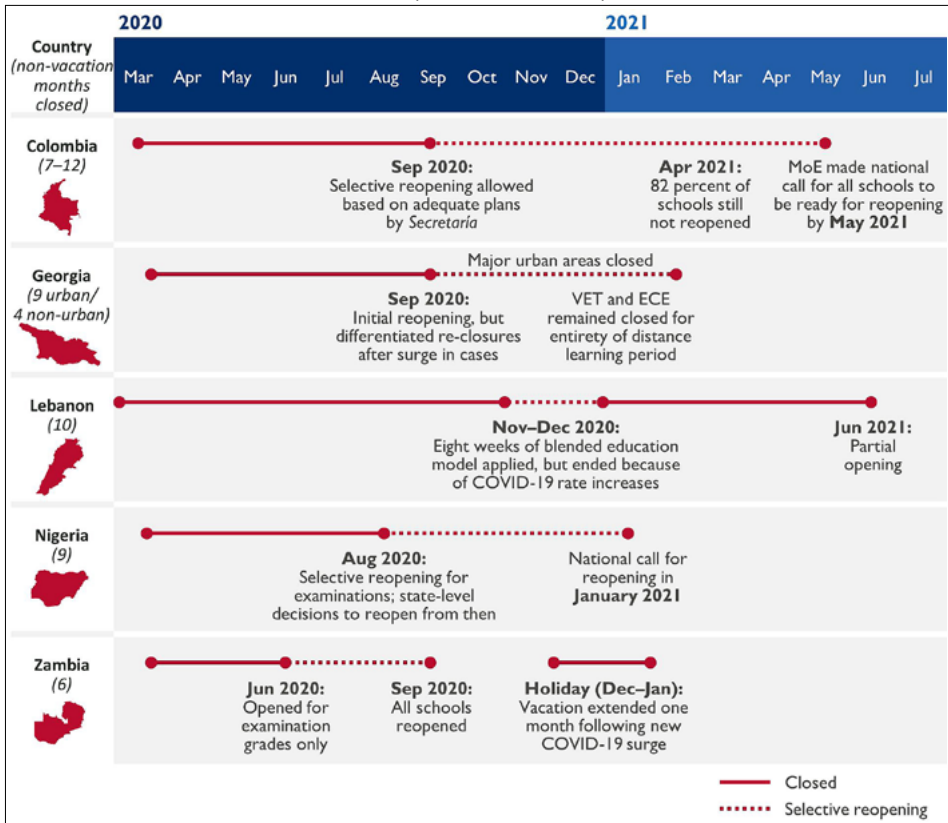
THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF SHOCKS AND STRESSORS

Our research highlighted how the pandemic evolved from being perceived and acted on as a single shock to becoming a chronic stressor within the education landscape. Early public health guidance that prioritized minimizing exposure to a new infectious disease led to abrupt and widespread school closures that lasted for weeks or months (see Figure 2). Shortly thereafter, education systems launched short-term responses to sustain educational engagement, which were typically provided through distance learning platforms, and planned for a return to in-person school before subsequent COVID-19 waves forced the schools to cancel or delay reopening. Figure 2 highlights these variations from country to country between March 2020 and July 2021.

³ These are (1) (re)engaging all learners, especially the most marginalized, in learning; (2) developing comprehensive plans for reopening learning institutions, ensuring the physical safety of students, teachers, and school administrators, whether meeting in person or remotely; (3) making modifications to instructional time, curriculum, and learning support to prioritize core learning objectives; (4) being strategic and methodical in making changes to examination and promotions procedures; and (5) ensuring that responses take into account the professional, safety, and psychosocial needs of education personnel.

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Figure 2: Timeline of School Closures, Reopening, and Total Months Closed, Public Primary and Secondary Schools



Source: Heaner et al. (2021)

It became clear that global guidance developed at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, including USAID’s own Return to Learning Toolkit, was not sufficiently adaptable to the pandemic as it evolved into a longstanding stressor on education continuity. National responses reflected varying awareness of the changing nature of the crisis and the need to put in place longer-term solutions to keep children engaged and learning. For example, in northern Nigeria, where radio programs serving marginalized learners since 2017 were redeployed in response to COVID-19, the state education boards in Adamawa, Sokoto, and Borno states (with I/NGO support) recognized the low uptake of these and other distance learning modalities. In response, they established community-based learning centers, where learners could gather and listen to educational radio programming in person. In Zambia, initial guidance and efforts to provide distance learning during the school closures (via radio, television, and internet-based instruction) proved ineffective in terms of student engagement, largely because of the low

percentage of households across the country with access to these modes of learning. Thus, the national response evolved toward prioritizing school readiness for safe in-person learning and away from the alternative modes of education delivery characteristic of the initial months of the pandemic.

Interactions between COVID-19 and other shocks and stressors also became increasingly visible as the pandemic continued. In Lebanon and Zambia, acute financial and political crises intersected with COVID-19 and eroded the effectiveness of institutional, community, and individual assets, resources, and skills. COVID-19 also acted as a catalyst for exacerbating social dynamics, particularly between displaced populations and host communities in Nigeria, Lebanon, and Colombia. In Colombia, the government responded by granting temporary protective status to Venezuelan migrants, which enabled them to access formal schooling and other social services. In contrast, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Lebanon did not provide clear guidance for responding to the educational needs of refugees; instead, nonstate education actors, such as I/NGOs and civil society organizations, stepped in to collaborate on the creation of strategy and guidance to ensure that refugee populations would have continued access to education.

Local capacities existed in some contexts that had preexisting stressors, and they were built on further to respond to disruptions of education. In Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia, for example, established education-sector working groups composed of both government and nongovernmental actors were able to quickly mobilize technical and financial resources for the COVID-19 response.

In Lebanon, which has the world's highest ratio of refugees per capita (UNHCR 2018), the core plan underpinning the education-sector crisis response was collaboratively crafted in 2014 at the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis by the Government of Lebanon, UN agencies, and other sectoral stakeholders. It set in place mechanisms for state and nonstate actors to contribute to and jointly develop formal and nonformal education programming for both Lebanese and Syrians. Thus, interagency coordination had been well established before the onset of COVID-19 in response to the prior, ongoing crisis. This enabled them to quickly mobilize the later response and to maintain refugee learners' access to education.

EXPOSURE AND SENSITIVITY

Countrywide school closures were enacted across all five case study countries at the onset of COVID-19 (see Figure 2). Education decisionmakers—such as ministry staff at both the national and local levels—presumed that all segments of

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society were equally at risk for COVID-19 exposure. However, it quickly became apparent that certain populations were more exposed to the virus and more sensitive to its direct and indirect effects. Over time, the public health response shifted to a more targeted approach in order to protect the most vulnerable. There was varying capacity across the five countries' education responses to capture and acknowledge the differential risk exposure and the related effects on groups of learners, educators, and communities.

For example, exposure to COVID-19 was tied strongly to population density, and it became increasingly apparent that there were lower case rates in rural areas than in urban areas. In Georgia, this led to a trajectory for reopening the schools in the eight largest cities that differed from the rest of the country. While all schools returned to in-person learning in September 2020, school-level monitoring and tracking of COVID-19 case rates showed that the risk of exposure at school was too great in the major cities. As a result, these schools resumed distance learning until February 2021.

The COVID-19 experience emphasizes that a starting point for response efforts in any crisis should be to identify the populations that are most exposed and most sensitive to the risk(s). Education systems that both identified differences in sensitivity and exposure to COVID-19 and had mechanisms to respond to these needs were poised to mitigate the negative effects on education. Georgia's differentiated response, described above, used these concepts effectively.

In Zambia, the national COVID-19 *Education Contingency Plan* explicitly emphasized the need to reach the most marginalized learners, noting that "efforts must aspire to reach all children in Zambia with an appropriate platform, with due consideration for girls, children with disabilities, refugees and migrants, and other vulnerable groups" (Ministry of General Education of Zambia 2020, 4). When Zambia received funding from the Global Partnership for Education in May 2020, they used it to serve marginalized learners in specific provinces. Zambia's response, however, was an exception. In other contexts, and despite evidence that particular groups were more sensitive or more often exposed to the effects of COVID-19, discrete education programming and resourcing to address this heightened vulnerability appeared to be limited.

THE FUNCTIONALITY OF RESILIENCE CAPACITIES

Across all five country contexts, resilience capacities visibly manifested themselves with varying degrees of impact on the system. This was determined by the extent to which such capacities (1) were acknowledged, (2) were supported by other levels of the system, and (3) could maintain their function in the face of other political, social, and economic stressors and shocks.

Where countries or more localized actors in the system had a track record of learning from, adapting to, and seeking transformation of the factors underpinning education system vulnerability, there was perhaps a stronger ability to both recognize and draw from the resources already available. This was most evident in Georgia, where significant efforts had been made to build school- and district-level leadership in recent decades. This decentralized capacity was leveraged during COVID-19. The national guidelines for school reopening gave latitude to district and school leaders. Additionally, prior investments in regional capacity allowed for better monitoring and reporting of COVID-19 effects from the school to district to national level. With many of these structures in place, the Government of Georgia was able to respond to more localized needs.

The education sector in Colombia had been similarly decentralized down to the regional *secretaría* level in 2002. When the ministry of education began developing reopening plans after the initial COVID-19-related school closures, they were delegated to the *secretaría* level to develop region- or school-appropriate reopening plans that took into account each area's contextual needs and strengths, as well as the prevalence of COVID-19 in each area. The ministry required that these plans be submitted for approval and designed additional approaches to monitor the efficacy of the implementation. By the end of 2020, the ministry had a solidified strategy, using the G20 model, to offer further support from the national to the regional levels of government, including targeted assistance to *secretarías* that were struggling to implement their plans.

In some contexts, a limited state-led response led nongovernmental education actors to take an active role in responding to COVID-19. This was particularly true in Zambia, Lebanon, and northern Nigeria, where the well-coordinated structures of interagency working groups may be understood as a capacity in themselves. In these contexts, the technical and financial resources mobilized by external actors to support or supplement government-led efforts were vital to mitigating negative outcomes for learners.

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The Zambian government's COVID-19 *Education Contingency Plan* was itself a collaborative effort among the Ministry of General Education and the Education Technical Working Group, which were comprised of a network of stakeholders in the education sector that included international and national NGOs, donors, UN organizations, the World Bank, and civil society organizations. The plan was produced within weeks of the first recorded case of COVID-19 in Zambia, which was one of the first ten countries to apply for and receive direct assistance for its pandemic education response through the Global Partnership for Education's accelerated funding mechanism. This effort to quickly mobilize the planning, funding, and, ultimately, the implementation of a COVID-19 response plan was dependent on the strong interagency cooperative structures already in place.

In northern Nigeria, the EiE working group, which was comprised of 50 partner organizations, mobilized quickly and in collaboration with both national and state education authorities. Members of the working group collaborated on perception surveys, needs assessments, and on sharing resources and tools. The group also emphasized reaching the most marginalized learners, which led them to prioritize radio instruction and community-level implementation of education activities.

ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR SUPPORTING RESILIENCE CAPACITIES

Through our research, we found that diverse actors and approaches across the education system—as well as redundancy and multiple entry points—supported its resilience. Decentralized planning and response capacity appeared to allow for more flexible and context-specific decisionmaking. Specific regions or decentralized actors were best positioned to make decisions about the appropriate and relevant actions for their location, schools, and learners. A system's ability to differentiate responses ensured that schools did not have to apply guidance uniformly, and that learners in less affected areas could continue in-person education.

However, empowered regional or district-level education action was most effective when national guidance and technical and financial support were available. National guidelines and priorities were set for both Colombia and Georgia but were left to subnational actors to implement. Colombia notably aimed to offer continued technical support to the secretaría level, which was different from past crises. Continued monitoring and support from the national level ensured a safe and effective return to learning.

Nigeria also operates on a decentralized education governance model, with much of the authority for education situated at the state level. During COVID-19, the ministry of education produced national guidelines for schools to reopen, but the ultimate decisions were made at the state level and, in the northern states, in cooperation with I/NGOs working on the EiE response there. The research found considerable challenges in monitoring the progress of reopening efforts at the state level, and in assessing learners' educational needs in specific states during COVID-19. As such, with limited information to report to national actors, these states operated without sufficient context-specific support from the ministry.

COVID-19 also offered space for innovative approaches to education challenges to emerge. Innovations arose out of necessity and functioned largely as absorptive responses, with potential to grow into adaptive or transformative capacities. For example, in Lebanon, a nonformal education-sector needs assessment prompted actors to pivot their delivery modalities and to invest additional resources through WhatsApp and similar applications. And yet the nonformal education response remained marginalized in the national response and reached only some learners (i.e., refugees), due to the existing national education policy. Nonetheless, opportunities exist to apply low-cost, technology-based solutions from the nonformal education subsector to support all learners' academic and wellbeing outcomes.

In Georgia, informal networks of teacher support emerged quickly once the schools closed and distance learning began. New channels of professional learning and peer support—largely Facebook groups—flourished as a place to discuss policies, classroom practices, and pedagogical ideas and solutions. One Facebook group, with a 300-person membership pre-COVID-19, grew to more than 30,000 participants during the pandemic. While state-led efforts supported teachers formally, informal networks were able to offer swift, personalized support as teachers adapted to distance learning and eventually to the return to in-person instruction. These networks were effective because they were driven by teachers' needs and interests.

CONCLUSIONS AND PRACTICAL LEARNING FOR THE FUTURE

USAID's education and resilience white paper, and the subsequent research conducted during COVID-19, provide both a theoretical framework and concrete evidence of how resilience dynamics function in the education sector. There are several implications for USAID's future work.

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First, the return-to-learning process and response must work along a continuum of preparedness, response, and recovery actions. For USAID and its partners, this requires greater attention in the medium- to long-term approaches to recovery that identify and target learners who have become more vulnerable due to the pandemic, and preparedness measures that protect them from future shocks and ongoing stressors.

Second, the pandemic reaffirms the importance of risk-informed planning and processes across all USAID education programs and responses. Tools, such as the USAID Rapid Education and Risk Analysis and the USAID Political Economy Analysis, need to be used more throughout the program cycle, along with increasing adaptive management approaches in all contexts, but especially in complex EiE contexts. Additionally, in the Return to Learning Toolkit and other USAID COVID-19 guidance and tools, concepts of exposure and sensitivity to risk must be starting points for ensuring a focus on equity and inclusion across all education-sector investments.

Third, resilience capacities do not manifest in the same way across countries or over time. Local strategies, networks, and resources remain absorptive in nature and are insufficient during times of crisis if they are not linked to institutional capacities that enable them to be adaptive and, ultimately, transformative. Additionally, the ability of resilience capacities to protect learning and wellbeing outcomes may be mediated by the complexity, intensity, duration, and scale of shocks and stressors. COVID-19 has reminded us that resilience should not be conflated with self-sufficiency.

Finally, and perhaps most important, COVID-19 has reaffirmed the idea that resilience should be seen as a process rather than an outcome. Capacities across the education system are only resilient if they result in maintained and improved education outcomes. However, the pandemic also highlights that achieving these outcomes is strongly linked to resilience capacities in other sectors, such as governance, health, and social protection. Using the concept of resilience and the collective outcome of maintaining and improving wellbeing in times of crisis provides an opportunity to program and plan in order to achieve longer-term, systems-oriented, and sustainable educational outcomes for all.

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